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CRACKER JOE

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CRACKER JOE.

CHAPTER I.

"I'M A BORN CRACKER, I AM."

CRACKER JOE had sold the old Fenn house at last. The place had been an eyesore to the small community of Wild Rose for a year, with its broken fences, battered gates, and hingeless doors.

"'N' I tell you, Luce, that the folks is quality, 'n' no mistake. Fur 's I can learn, the man has been a merchant in New York, 'n' failed; business gone to smash, 'n' health all but gone: that 's what they tell me."

"How could he buy the Fenn house, then?" his wife asked.

"Oh, he hed a rich brother, 'n' he bought it for him, I s'poze. Likely he 'll give it to him; I should n't wonder."

"How good it must seem to have a brother!" Mrs. Carew said, stopping her work to smooth out the edges. "I never had brother or sister."

"Well, ain't I the hull fam'ly?" her husband asked, as he took an old smoke-grimed, battered pipe from the shelf and struck a match.

"Oh, yes, you are everything to me," said his wife, with a smile.

It was a winsome face, that of Lucy Carew, fair, childlike; the softly-rounded cheeks bright yet with the bloom of youth, the brown eyes thick-lashed, bronze-gold hair so abundant that when uncoiled it hung nearly to her feet.

"What 's the name of these new people?" she asked.

"Ainsley. They lived on an avenue in New York, reg'lar swell style, — granite house, big bay winders from top to bottom, lots o' servants. Well, they 'll see a diff'rence;" and he laughed as he drew his first whiff. "Strange how poor folks tends this a way. Business gone to smash? Go to Floridy. Health broke down? Go to Floridy. The idiots seem to think that Floridy 's a cure-all fur empty pockets, worn-out lungs, 'n' dilapidated characters. Now, I don't want no folks to b'l'eve them condemned liars, who go round the country with orange-groves in their pockets, preaching up that Floridy 's the poor man's paradise. I 'd like to kick 'em, I would!"

"You were poor, once, Joe," said his wife, gently.

"I 'm a born cracker, I am; ther 's a diff'rence. Floridy 's no kinder to poor folks than any other place; but let a man come here with any sort of an income to live on, 'n' he ken make a paradise, that 's ef he 's the right kind of a man. I tell you Floridy sand ain't no respecter of persons, now. Well, anyhow, I 'm glad these folks is a comin'. I don't care how 'ristocratic a man is, purviding it 's the real thing."

Joe Carew was an excellent specimen of the wide-awake, go-ahead Florida cracker, — thin almost to gauntness, sandy of hair and beard, with splendid eyes, a broad forehead, a sharp nose, a wide but well-shaped mouth, under which gleamed teeth even as a string of pearls, a bronze-red moustache, and a smile that was charming for the expression of utter guilelessness it gave to his otherwise shrewd, sedate countenance.

His costume, as he rode daily from field to field over his large possessions, was somewhat unique, — an English hunting-jacket, corduroy trousers, a huge sombrero, and boots that came above his knees. To his negro hands, who both admired and feared him, he was always the master; and he had the enviable notoriety of being the richest planter in the State. He was keen in matters of business, close with his dependents,

and lavish in his home expenditures and farm accessories.

Fifty ploughs were kept going on his acres, seventy horses and mules fed in his spacious stables; almost two hundred negroes were busy afield, with horses and ploughs, daily.

His farm was considered one of the best tilled and most productive in all Florida. Six hundred acres in cotton, three hundred in corn, one hundred in orange-trees, — to say nothing of the vegetables that were sent to market in their season, bringing him rich returns, — represented a large productive value. His cows were the finest for miles around; some forty were kept up, the rest he never pretended to number, but let them run, branding innumerable calves every year. Sheep browsed on the short hillsides; hens, chickens, and turkeys wandered at their will wherever the bountiful harvest called them.

Lucy Cottage (he had named the homestead after his wife), like most Florida cottages, was a dingy, ram-shackle edifice, consisting of six rooms on the ground floor and four or five in the story above. Every year Joe promised to build himself a spacious mansion, had spoken time and again to one of the city architects respecting plans, but as yet the "new place" was a thing of the future.

The Florida atmosphere is an impartial artist, and paints the newest of new shingles an unvarying tinge of brown. Hence, unless they are whitewashed or stained, the houses, from the stateliest edifice down to the veriest shanty, are all of a color. Set in the midst of tall pines, with here a line of orange-trees and there huge clumps of bananas, they are not unpicturesque, though lacking in many essentials of beauty.

"Miss Luce," as the mistress of the house was called by all but her immediate family, justified the general verdict which pronounced her a handsome woman. Joe had brought her to Florida ten years before,—a mere child in appearance, a mother at sixteen. Now, at twenty-six, she was as natty and plump a little matron as could be found in all the country-side. Her husband and servants were devoted to her, the duties of housekeeping sat lightly on her shoulders, and care and worry were banished at sight of her smiling face. She romped with her little ones, hobnobbed with the help without detriment to her dignity, liked above all things a house full of company, and ruled her husband, who could be ruled by no one else, chiefly, perhaps, through her knowledge of gastronomic compounds; for Nature had made her a very superior cook, and no delicate dish was ever intrusted even to the skilled hands of Aunt Pruny,

who had been queen of the kitchen, there and elsewhere, for thirty years or more.

Curiously enough Aunt Pruny always resented this innovation upon her privileges, and always yielded. She was a tall woman, not very dark, large but not fat, with cavernous eyes that gloomed or lighted as occasion required, a handsome face whose immobility was seldom disturbed, — only, in fact, when telling her religious experience in the dialect of her race, when her countenance would change with her varying moods, whether ecstatic, prophetic, or condemnatory. She considered herself a chosen vessel of the Lord; and where the Spirit prompted her to go, her message must be carried, whether to rich or poor, prince or peasant.

"Pruny, I 'm going to make a Saliy Lunn," said Mrs. Joe, coming into the kitchen one day.

Aunt Pruny turned slowly round, armed with a pewter spoon a yard long.

"Yo' can't hev de stove, honey; I 's a skimmin' de blackb'ry juice."

"Yes, I can; the oven is clear, if the juice is not."

"Yo' le' me 'lone. *I* 'll make de Sally Lunn."

"I know, Aunt Pruny; but I want it just my way, and nobody can make it just my way."

"No mo 'n no critter kin live yo' life, 'n' nobody kin die fo' ye," said Aunt Pruny, grimly.

"Exactly so," said Mrs. Joe, brightly. "Get me out some flour and the sugar and spice-box. I 've got to set Kitty her lesson. I'll be back in a moment."

Aunt Pruny went muttering to the closet and made a great clatter with the dishes.

"'Spects she think nobody kin make cake as she kin, which I might 'low fer Sally Lunn; 'n' thet great hulkin' Joe, he think so too."

Then, as if overcome by some sudden transport, she sat down in the ancient kitchen armchair, in front of the stove, and began chuckling and laughing to herself.

"When I thinks — der Lord forgib me — how I might spile dat pore little woman's life! 'T would n't take but one leetle word or two — honey, I 's got a secret 'bout Cracker Joe dat 'ould jes take de heart right outer yo'. Le' me see; dey say she 's only twenty-six, — a mighty young ooman, 'n' a sweet one. Ef she live ter be seventy, — dat 's de age donated to man, — she hab jes fo'ty-fo' y'ars ter hate him in, ef she 's like mos' oder women. Fo'ty-fo' y'ar to set at de table 'n' he grows to be an ole, ole man! 'N' ef dat ar gal comes, as come she mus', finally, at las', — ain't got nowhar else ter go, — she 'll hev to swaller dat too. Lordy! what I knows 'n'

keeps to myse'f! yes, 'n' will keep ter myse'f long as dat ar Joe true to de promus what he make. I 's got de jedgment fer him, 'n' der sorrer fo' her, right in my two han's; but I 's hon'able, I 's hon'able, — dat is, s' long as he are."

She clenched her fingers over the spoon, and began to skim the scum from the blackberry juice as Mrs. Joe returned. Assuming her most devout expression, she said, —

"Nine precious souls got dar crowns las' night, — nine convicts, all dancin' 'n' shoutin' 'fore de Lord's camp."

"You mean converts, Aunt Pruny. Are you never going to understand the difference? Convicts are men in prison, in jail, in penitentiaries."

"Den I 's justificated in de use ob de word, Miss Luce, fo' we 's all bawn in chains, 'n' put in prison, 'n' — "

"There, hush, Aunt Pruny," said Mrs. Joe, laughing. "Keep your sermons for your 'stracted meetin's.' Joe and I are hardened sinners. I shall never forget how you frightened me with your twenty convicts. I 'm used to them now."

The Sally Lunn was a success. So Joe thought, who sat down to table in a white shirt.

"Them Ainsleys is coming on to-night's train," he said. "Reckon I 'll go down 'n' see what they look like."

Pruny stood in the background, ready to help when needed. Sometimes she took an old servant's privilege of joining in the conversation, but not often; for Cracker Joe frowned on the ancient custom, though he generally allowed her to have her say without comment. Something had gone a little wrong with him to-day, and he was inclined to be irritable.

"I h'ard dey wor might' nice folkses," said Aunt Pruny, as she came forward to take off the dishes. "Dey 's de same 'suasion 's Hummit George, — 'piscopals, dey calls it; I calls it de Debil's chu'ch."

"Hold your tongue, old woman!" said Joe, in quick, harsh tones. "Haven't I told you that man's name was never to be mentioned in my presence?"

Aunt Pruny went out, muttering. She set the dishes down with an utter disregard to their value, so that they rattled again, then almost threw them into the great dish-pan, where an ebony Topsy stood ready to wash them.

"On'y a low-down cracker, dat ar Joe!" she said, dashing in the knives and forks after the dishes. "When my ole mars owned de hull county, Cracker Joe wor eatin' po'k 'n' cow-peas, wid clay 'n' hoe-cake fer change. *He* to look down on Hummit George, wid his fust-class blood, case he 's got de land 'longed to his fader 'n'

granfader 'n' all his 'lations! Does seem 's if de Lord did n't do jes de t'ing when He put all dese yer blessin's into dat a man's keepin'."

"Joe," said his wife, a gentle protest in her manner, as Aunt Pruny left the room, "I'm afraid you 've hurt her feelings."

"As if niggers had any!" he growled. "It aggravates me, by periwinkle! to hear that pharisaical darky sending people to hell by the wholesale. In my opinion, a little touch of the fire and brimstone she deals to others would make her more charitable."

Aunt Pruny heard him. She was bringing in nuts and oranges for the dessert, and as she set them on the table, smiled; an acid, gloomy, lofty smile it was, making her dusky countenance more saturnine than ever. Then she folded her arms and rolled up her eyes, — a martyr in her own estimation to Cracker Joe's discourtesy.

CHAPTER II.

"I HOLD THAT MAN JUST SO!"

IT was getting dusk; and as the day had been rainy, Joe had a fire made in the back parlor, where the family sat of evenings.

Only the magical light of the fat pine could impart an element of the picturesque to a commonplace room, giving it an air of elegance and refinement which it lacked in the glare of day.

The furniture was good solid mahogany, things Joe had bought at random, but which, singularly enough, justified his "reckoning" that it would match. A bookcase that he had purchased at a bargain reached from floor to ceiling, — its brass ornaments reflecting back the strong, red firelight. This was filled with solid reading matter; for the man was, in his way, a student, and possessed of an almost phenomenal memory, which enabled him to utilize his knowledge, crude though it was.

The glint of the dark wood, the handsome couch and comfortable chairs, the red-stained floor, covered here and there with gay mats and

rugs, the many brackets, the pictures on the walls, framed in curly pine, all took the color of the luminous resinous flame, which leaped upwards as the burning logs sent down rich spurts of turpentine that formed each a separate fire. Outside, the rain fell monotonously, adding zest to the comfort within.

Cracker Joe smoked his pipe seated in his own big arm-chair, and surveyed by turns the pretty girlish face of his wife and the merry antics of the children, — a boy and two girls, — busily playing with their toys, while the mother mended stockings and hummed softly to herself.

In the kitchen Aunt Pruny was singing in a rich, vibrant contralto —

> "I loves Jesus all my days,
> Although I be a slave;
> In the blessed arms of Jesus
> I 'll be carried to my grave."

"Shut that door, Kitty!" said Joe to his little daughter, with a fierce imprecation under his breath. "I 'll be condemned if I don't hate the very sight 'n' sound of that nigger! I wish to heaven we could git rid of her, Lucy."

"Why, Joe! I shouldn't know what to do without her; you must n't mind her, honey;" said his wife, with a placid countenance. "She has the sweetest voice I ever heard. I love to hear

her sing. I don't believe you dislike her half as much as you say you do; but you know you can't scold *me*, and you must have somebody to scold; you're so used to driving the blacks outside, you want somebody to drive inside, and it might as well be Aunt Pruny as anybody. She don't mind it."

"I'll make her mind it, some of these times," said Joe, as he lighted a fresh pipe; and his hands trembled.

"You would n't send her away, I hope; she does my work faithfully, and we're used to her."

"If she was n't such a durned fanatic!" said Joe, with a gesture of annoyance.

"Well, yes, she is rather fanatical," said his wife, thoughtfully; "but then she enjoys her fancies."

"Looks like it," said Joe, explosively; "regular funeral procession every time she comes in. I never see the soup, or a roast of beef, or a turkey, but I think of old Kainup graveyard. She gits worse, too; Croon tells me she's got more influence than any of the black ministers, and they're about the worst set I have to deal with; that she interprets her dreams, even to the congregation, and they make a regular oracle of her. By and by she'll be telling something to our hurt if she gits her temper up."

"Yes, I believe she is a great power in their

church," said Lucy, laughing; "but then she's a great power in our kitchen. I don't believe she'd ever try to harm us. I don't know what we should do without her."

"Well enough!" said Joe; "there's younger and spryer, and quite as capable. To tell the truth, I'm afraid of her. If she could go to heaven without being helped, I'd send her there and pay all expenses. You need n't laugh. If ever anybody had an evil eye, that woman has, and I hate to have her look at them children. Dono why 't does trouble me so, but that's a fact."

"Old cracker superstition," said Lucy, looking over to the bedroom leading out of the parlor, whose open door revealed a pretty bed canopied with soft white muslin, then at the little fellow who had fallen asleep at her feet. "Oh, Joe, I'm glad I'm not a cracker!"

"Mamma is real sweet gingerbread, is n't she?" spoke up the nine-year-old Kitty, who had been apparently absorbed in her play.

"And papa's a real hard old cracker," laughed little Nan in her turn.

"And you are two saucy little brown sugar snaps," said Joe, joining in the laugh.

"Papa, any little girls coming with that new family?" asked Kitty, taking her favorite position between his knees, and holding his clasped hands about her.

"Not 's I knows on, pet," he made reply.

"Poor Kitty!" said Mrs. Joe; "she heard when Mrs. Beck came that there was a little girl. She was so disappointed!"

Joe threw back his head and laughed, and the grotesque shadow he made on the wall laughed in pantomime.

"So there was, 'n' they say she is n't much older 'n Kitty here; but, oh Lord, the git up! I could make my solemn 'davit she 'd slept in stays since the day she wor born — 'n' bustle! 'n' style as you call it. Thinks I to myself, that gal ought to hev seen her twenty-fifth birthday, though she did n't look capable of carrying more than ten."

"It 's all her mother's fault," said Mrs. Joe, with an impatient gesture. "It does provoke me so! They have n't been here three months, and nobody so talked about. It 's simply horrid. She 's horrid; and I wish they 'd never come."

"Let up a little, Luce," said Joe; "it 's odd to hear you talking against folks."

"Well, it 's because I 'm disappointed," his wife answered. "I heard she was coming here with a little girl, and I thought she would be an acquisition; but I don't like her. The child is more of a woman than her mother is, in all but her years. She 'll be next neighbor to the Ainsleys, and she 'll force herself on them as she has on us."

"Ther' 's one thing she can't do with them, — cheek it for corn 'n' fodder," laughed Joe. "She may borry their glass tumblers and silver pitchers 'n' tea 'n' coffee 'n' all that," he added, as he watched the smoke spirals of his pipe, reflectively. "She 's not quite so bad as the Fenns, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know. Mrs. Fenn had the manners of a lady, but she was poor and shiftless, like the Dunns."

"Lucky for me," said Joe. "That 's the way I got the Fenn property; and I made a good thing of it. But this woman, Beck. Hark! talk of the — well, you know who — and he 's sure to come. If that ain't Mistress Beck's laugh, it don't belong to none."

Voices were heard outside, — the impatient exclamations of a man mingled with the peculiar sonorous *ha-ha* of a woman's laugh.

"That 's her among a thousand," said Joe; "and in the rain too, by periwinkle! Just like her! Open the door, Kitty."

The child obeyed. A sudden gust of the easterly wind, filled with rain-drops, sent her shivering back as the door opened; and there entered, first a portly, good-looking woman, her black eyes blinking as she came out of the darkness into the red light of the fire, which illumined her face and her damp garments. She

peered round the room from under her waterproof hood, and seemed in that glance to take in every object it contained.

Following her was a *petite*, slender girl of fourteen, decidedly pretty, with large, aggressive, steel-blue eyes, a yellow, fluffy fringe of hair caressing her low, fair forehead, every feature speaking of self-assertion and a determined will, her movements swift and lithe as those of a wild panther.

Next came a youth of eighteen, his face rather handsome, but sleepy and surly in character. He moved like one obliged to be there against his will.

"We're awfully wet!" said the first comer, Mrs. Beck, in a low voice, her bold black eyes resting on Cracker Joe. "So glad to see a fire! May we come up and get dry?"

"Why, certainly!" said Mrs. Joe, who had risen, launched her work into the big wicker basket, full of bright wools, socks, and darning-cotton. "Let me have your wraps. I'll call Pruny, and she will dry them at the kitchen stove."

"No, indeed! I'll sit right here, by your beautiful fire," said Mrs. Beck. "Don't trouble yourself about us."

"We never dreamed it was going to rain," said Fanny Beck, who looked in stature any-

where from ten to fourteen, but whose manner was that of a woman of thirty, as she took the chair proffered her. "This blundering fellow got us out of the road, and we were lost half a dozen times. We were nicely caught in this deluge, and only one waterproof between us!"

"Did n't you know the way better than that?" asked Joe, as he turned to the boy.

"They 're all the time fencing across in this horrid place," said Norris Knowlton, in his hesitating voice. With a native instinct of distrust, he felt that Cracker Joe regarded him with a certain contempt. "It 's a miserable country, and the people are worse; and I would n't stay here if I could help myself." He emphasized this decision with a dry cough.

"You impolite fellow!" said Fanny, looking at him like an angry little kitten with its back up; at which his head and shoulders fell, and his black eyes sought the floor.

"Complimentary, I must say," growled Cracker Joe; "but that 's your way, eh, youngster?"

The boy's sleepy eyes opened wider, and a frown darkened his forehead.

"That 's my way, decidedly!" he made quick reply. "I always say what 's in my mind. You know, of course, when *we* come here, we come for fodder."

"To my cost, yes; the last is n't paid for,

either," retorted Cracker Joe. "I always say what's in my mind, too, youngster."

"Oh, well, you don't care for that, a rich man like you," said Mrs. Beck, persuasively, smoothing her limp bangs, that, straight as they were cut over straight black brows, gave an angular and mannish look to the face, dark almost to swarthiness. "You know I can pay."

"I know money is money," said Joe; "and it must be a pretty keen one as monkeys me out of it."

Meantime the trim little house-mother had been putting the children to bed. Now she came out so bright and smiling that it seemed she and not the fire that lighted the room. She said something in her gentle way to the young girl, who followed her motions with quick, silent glances, but spoke as seldom as possible to the mother, whose garments smoked before the fire. Once she asked her if she was not afraid of taking cold, covering her dislike with a thin veil of courtesy.

"No, indeed; I never take cold," was the answer. Then the woman turned to Cracker Joe, and pierced him with her black eyes.

"Now you *must* let me have the fodder," she went on. "I've got a check for fifty dollars at home. I did truly mean to bring it, but I forgot. We can't always think of things, you know,

especially we poor women who have no husbands to look after us. I promise you next time I 'll bring the money."

"Your husband had better come down, from all I hear," said Joe, bluntly.

His wife gave him a glance of warning; but the woman evidently took the speech as a compliment, and burst into a hearty laugh.

"He is quite aware by this time that I can take care of myself," she said; "and as to company, I 'm used to it. I should die down here in this dull place if I could n't have a bit of fun now and then. Norris knows that, don't you, Norris?"

"I know you keep my horses pretty busy," said the boy, in a complaining tone.

"Why, to be sure. What were horses made for but to use, and their owners but to command?" she said with a touch of irony. "Come, Mr. Carew! For shame to make a woman plead with you! You 'll let me have the fodder, after coming all this distance and getting so wet. Norris will go surety for me, besides. *I* came to see *you*, too. I 'm not so selfish as Norris, there. Oh, by the way, have you any chickens to sell?"

"Not a chick," said Joe, sententiously. "Had an order for two hundred yesterday; can't spare another one."

"I heard that our next neighbor, Susan Dunn, had very choice fowls to sell," said Mrs. Joe, a little ashamed of her husband's gruff manner.

"Dunn! I think I've seen her — sells pork now and then — smokes, and drawls fearfully. She has choice ones, you say; that's what I'm after. I'll try and see her to-night, now I am here. I'm going into poultry; they say there's a deal of money in it."

"There may be," said Mrs. Joe, "for some people, but my husband never found it so. He could n't be hired to raise chickens for a specialty, could you, Joe?"

Before he could answer, Mrs. Beck broke in again.

"I want a lamb for Fanny, here, to cosset, and a pair of pigeons; and you *must* let me have them for love if not money. Come, you will, won't you?" she asked coaxingly, while a little frown came in Mrs. Joe's clear forehead as the woman looked straight in her husband's eyes.

"Well, if I must, I suppose I must; but mind, I don't do it for love, but good square cash. My wife is the only woman of my acquaintance who gets favors free. I'm a man of business, you see. I'll go out and speak to Croon about the fodder; but don't come empty-handed agen, for I may not be as good-humored as I am to-night, mebby. It's stopped rainin', but it's precious dark yet."

Mrs. Joe's ears and cheeks tingled for the woman who for the sake of a favor would submit to what she considered an indignity, even though it was her husband who offered it; but Mrs. Beck seemed quite at her ease, and moved her chair near the centre-table, which was covered with a dark red cloth and the usual accumulation of pictures and bric-à-brac. She picked up a card. It was blank, with the exception of a name, "Lucy Carew," written apparently with much painstaking in the corner.

"What a neat little hand!" said Mrs. Beck. "I'm going to steal it, may I?" and she looked archly over to Mrs. Joe.

"You can have it, certainly," was the reply.

Then Cracker Joe's wife went to the door, ostensibly for a breath of fresh air, really to hide her vexation that this woman, whom she could not respect, had wanted the card, and she had given it. As soon as her back was turned, Mrs. Beck whipped out a pencil, as she herself would have expressed the motion. Even Fanny and Norris, who were laughing together over an illustrated paper, did not see how skilfully and rapidly she wrote over the signature of which she had possessed herself: —

"Please let Mrs. Beck have all the chickens she wants. I will be responsible."

She was quite capable of this act; if she had

seen a picture in the photograph album that she coveted, she would not have scrupled to remove it; only she never dreamed of considering herself a thief.

Fanny and Norris had their heads together still over the pictures. It was noticeable that all the fun or merit observable, Fanny saw first. She was a bright girl, and only needed a mother like Cracker Joe's wife to make her a good one. She evidently enjoyed her conquest over the young fellow at her side, saying things that a more spirited or possibly intelligent boy would have resented.

It was an hour before the wagon was loaded, and Mrs. Joe drew a long sigh of relief as she sat down in her own little sewing-chair alone.

"Her very presence irritates me," she said to herself.

"Je-hos-a-phat!" exclaimed Joe, as he came in a few minutes later. "That woman weighs a ton. I helped her on the wagon, and my two arms ache. As badly as they say I use horses, I would n't be guilty of putting a load like that on one horse. No, by periwinkle! not if he could carry two ton. Little Miss sat in the hay — no, little Miss lay down, bless you. 'Don't you dare wake me till we get home,' she said. Well, they are a crowd, to be sure!"

"I think," said Mrs. Joe, speaking with the

utmost deliberation, as if weighing every word, "that Mrs. Beck is a dreadful woman."

"Now you don't, though, do you? I won't deny that she is queerish, but it's going far to say 'dreadful,' is n't it? — not like you. She 's got one merit, if it is a merit, — a pair of remarkably fine eyes in her head."

"I think," Mrs. Joe said again, and more deliberately than before, "that she is using that weak-minded boy to further her own purposes. He is heir to considerable property, and very delicate. She is laying her plans. Oh, dear! such women set me wild. I want to say something — crushing, but I never can. I 'm afraid of her. I wish his people had taken young Knowlton away. She means to marry that child to him, and, mark my word, she 'll do it."

"Great grandmother!" exclaimed Joe, just saved from a breach of the commandments by a glance from his wife; "why, she 's only two or three years older than our Kitty!"

"And I was only five years older when I married you," said Mrs. Joe; "but I was n't sold, and I had no manœuvring mother. That boy is n't twenty yet. And the poor child is as bold as her mother. As for getting pay for your fodder, don't expect it. She does n't mean to pay. Oh, you men! you need only have a woman look at you, and you give in at once. Such a brazen piece!

modest women don't use their eyes in that fashion. I hope the Ainsleys won't noticé her."

"They won't notice us, maybe," said Joe, knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"It's our place to call on them first, and then we'll see," said his wife, with spirit.

"Don't believe you'll do it," said Joe, "'cause I'm a cracker. Ashamed of your cracker husband, I expect."

"Now, Joe, you know better!" said the little woman, with almost angry emphasis. "It's for myself I'm a little nervous, never having been accustomed to much society, and no education to speak of."

"We've got something they haven't," said Joe, "if they be tony New York folks."

"What's that!" She looked up, her face expectant.

Cracker Joe deliberately laid aside his pipe. With much show of painstaking he brought out of the inside pocket of his vest a pocket-book crammed full of bank-bills, and held it up with a gesture of exultation.

"This, little one, — that gives beggars fine horses, and dumb people tongues o' gold; that makes the lame leap, 'n' the lazy work, 'n' the low-down the equal of princes. This!" — and he waved his treasure in the air, — "and pretty much all out of old Hickson's two thousand

acres, while his grandson lives with a tainted name on the outskirts of the estate that once he looked upon as his birthright; and they call him Hermit George!"

"Don't laugh; don't look that way, Joe. I should hardly know you for my dear good husband, you seem so — so unlike yourself," said his wife, half rising from her chair, and stopping like one dazed or spellbound, a troubled look in her eyes, a hesitation in her manner, though she had been in the act of going toward him. "You don't rejoice over any man's downfall, I hope."

"I do, by the eternal rocks, I do! I hold that man just so;" and he turned his hand-palms up. Curiously enough, the gesture was the same that Aunt Pruny had made that day when speaking of him. "And the best of it is," he added, "he don't know it. I've held him just there for ten years!"

"Oh, Joe, how good you ought to be yourself, then!" said Mrs. Carew; and there were both pity and sincerity in her voice. "You ought never to have gone one step out of the narrow way to do a bad deed, or wrong another, — man, woman, or child."

She was standing near him, now, and looked very grave yet very childlike by the side of her tall husband.

Cracker Joe gave her a searching glance, then seemed to collapse as he flung himself into his big arm-chair.

"Oh, well!" he said nervously, "don't you worry about me, though niggers have long tongues, and vile ones."

"What do you mean, Joe?" his wife asked wonderingly.

"I was thinking of Pruny. She was old Hickson's slave, and his son-in-law's slave. She hates me because I got her master's property in my possession, as I swore I would when he treated me and mine like dogs. I did n't know but she had been telling you about it, with her lying tongue."

"Do you think," — and now Mrs. Joe grew tall as she stood there in the firelight, flushed and indignant, — "do you think I would listen to anything to your discredit from my black servants, or ever speak of you to them?"

"No; and I 'm an old fool," he said, "to brag as I did just now. Luce, you 're the whitest woman, soul and body, I ever did see. I won't anger you agen that way. I might know your nature was different from mine; but then I 'm only a cracker, you know. Come, kiss and make up before I go down to the train to see them Ainsleys come."

The little woman's resentments were always short-lived. Another moment, and she was laughing and chatting, telling some merry nonsense about the children; but Joe now and then drew a long sigh as he busied himself with getting ready to go and see the new arrival.

CHAPTER III.

"EVERYTHING COSTS, WHEN ONE IS POOR."

THE train was three hours behind time. It stopped at last at a little unpainted station, which, as there was no station-master, was closed and fastened.

"Wild Rose!" shouted the conductor. Four or five sleepy passengers were at once in motion.

"Give me that bag, Stella; you have too many bundles to carry. Now, look alive, Tom! Have you got the big shawl-strap? Father, you take charge of mother, and I'll see to Stella. Tom can look out for himself."

It had been raining, and the sandy soil was packed and hard. The road glistened like silver under the moonlight. After the boxes and other baggage had been attended to, Russel Ainsley, a manly-looking boy of nineteen, gazed about him, evidently disappointed at the view.

Nothing to be seen as far as the eye could reach but tall pines. The ruins of an old mill made a fanciful though sombre addition to the picture.

Huddled together, strangers in a strange land, the new family stood, not daring to speak their thoughts.

The train went shrieking into distance. The stars swung large and bright, the moon came from under a cloud and silvered the tops of the solemn pines.

"For pity's sake, is n't there a house somewhere?"

It was Stella Ainsley who spoke, — a lovely girl of seventeen.

"Uncle Ray said the house was not in sight from the station, though not far away," said Tom. "Anyhow, it 's a straight road; the house is on the right. Lucky there 's a moon!"

"A house — yes, but no furniture in it. We can't sit up all night."

"Never mind, my dear, we must make the best of it," said Mrs. Ainsley, in a low, patient voice. "I 'm so afraid papa is worn out," she added, aside.

"Papa, are you dreadfully tired?" asked Stella, going round to his side, and patting his shoulder as she stood there.

"Not as tired as I thought I should be;" but Stella noticed that his breath came very short.

Those terrible reverses! How they had made him suffer!

"Well, Russ," said Tom, "I move we go —

home." His boyish, hopeful voice heartened them all. "Uncle says there's a man in the house and a horse and wagon in the stable. The sooner we start, why, the sooner we'll have our breakfast in the morning."

They went out into the road and walked on, Russel and his sister leading the way, and soon came in sight of the house, — a big, black blot against the sky. It was not a cheerful-looking place at night. The gate hung by one hinge. Dogweed was plentiful, and much of the fence lay on the ground. Trees, blurred and unshapely, grew in clumps. There was not a light to be seen.

It might be pleasant enough by daylight, but Stella's heart misgave her. Her uncle had never seen the property, but thinking it a bargain had bought it. It was in Florida; that was enough to prejudice him in its favor. Everybody was wild just then about Florida.

Russel rapped at the door with his father's cane. No response; not a sound anywhere, save the shrill scream of an owl. Again and again he struck the resounding panels, and was about to try some other way of entering the premises, when a window was slowly opened at the top of the house, and a voice unmistakably African in accent called, —

"Who 's dar?"

"We are the people who are come to live here. The train was late; come down and let us in."

"How many of you is dar?" cautiously asked the negro.

"Enough to break open this door if you don't come down in a hurry," said Russel. "We want you to help us, — we'll pay you well. Come, stir yourself!"

This speech seemed to quicken the faculties of the man upstairs.

"Comin', sah," he said, and presently appeared at the door.

"I do hope there 's a chair in the house," said Stella. "If there are none, papa dear, we can sit on the stairs. I suppose they have stairs — but oh, what a place!"

"What is your name?" asked Russel of the white-headed old man.

"I 's Cole, sah."

"Can you find something for the ladies to sit on, Cole, while we go after our goods?"

The man ran upstairs and soon appeared with two broken chairs. These, with a couple of boxes dragged from some dusty corner, made tolerable seats.

"Is there a horse in the stable?" asked Russel.

"Dar am a sort ob horse, sah," said the negro, grinning; "he are a mule."

"Oh, my uncle bought a horse, but I suppose they have cheated his eye-teeth out of him. Well, there's a wagon, I suppose."

"Yes, sah."

"And harness?"

"Dar am a sort ob harness, sah. I's mended it putty tolably wid ropes."

"You can haul with it?"

"Right peart; yes, sah."

"Then put the mule in the wagon at once. We have some boxes to bring from the station."

"Must you leave us, Russel, in this awfully forlorn place?" asked Stella, her lips quivering.

"Hello, little one, where is all that grand courage you started with, — oozing out at the finger-ends so soon?"

"No — oh, no — only I'm tired — and if the train had been on time we might be abed and asleep now. Never mind, I won't be silly; the wagon is coming. Be sure don't forget the lamps and candles, or the oil stove. The provisions are in the box marked with red paint. I believe I'm hungry."

"I know I am," said Tom. "You can easily make a cup of coffee."

"Don't presume to think of cups and saucers at this late hour," laughed Stella. It was a quavering little laugh, but it did her good.

She turned to go into the room. Her mother

had been busy to some purpose. Suddenly the place seemed one red blaze. Heaps of fat pine had been laid by the side of the old-fashioned fireplace, and a single match touched to the dry wood made an illumination.

"I was so glad to see wood handy," said Mrs. Ainsley. "Your father was chilly. What a splendid color!"

"And all we want for nothing," said Stella, holding her hands to the blaze.

"Yes, dear; wood costs in New York."

"Everything costs, when one is poor," said Stella. "But this fire, how beautiful it is! I'm so glad you thought of it!"

She dragged one of the boxes up to the stone hearth, which was by no means one of those ideal objects that poets sing of, but cracked, stained, and crumbled at the edges. The fire of fat pine lent it a homely beauty notwithstanding its wear, as it did the soft dark eyes, rounded curves, golden brown hair, and fair bright complexion of the girl who sat there drinking in its warmth and cheer.

A rude exchange, indeed, for Stella Ainsley, for the palatial beauty, the ease and comfort of a city residence; but Stella was not the mere girl of the period, with no interest beyond her own selfish cares and pleasures. She had enjoyed the good things of prosperity to the utmost, and as yet the

brightness and glory of the world had not palled upon her. She was not like the girl who said if there was no dancing in heaven she should prefer annihilation, but she confessed to a great fondness for that amusement. The Fitz Lashes and other young men of her set had led off with her in the German, driven her behind expensive horses, and visited at her father's house; yet beyond the pleasure of a partnership in the dance or the drive or the drawing-room, she had felt no need of their companionship. One or two she had fancied, but on a further acquaintance the charm vanished.

Stella was a girl of rare gifts; quiet, but a thinker, and had read much. Most people called her shy and proud, some odd, and even her most intimate friends had not fathomed the beautiful depths of her character. So far, as I have said, she had not found any one worthy of her affection. Still, the heart of a woman is never quite at rest until it is safely anchored in the haven of some strong, manly, protecting love. Such a love, and no other, did Stella Ainsley demand.

But to return to the fire and Stella's contemplation.

"Did you ever see such a dismal ho— I mean it does n't look a fit place for Christian people, now does it, mamma?"

"Not in just the state it is now, my dear," said her mother; "but your uncle knew nothing about it, only that it was a bargain. You must remember we shall have no rent to pay, — and it may be a good opening for Russel."

Stella sighed.

Would Russel, who had hitherto found life a succession of pleasures, and who had not been wise in their choice or their use, set himself to stern labor in this lonely wilderness? His uncle's offer had been very kind. In five years, if he would care for it so long, the orange-grove already set out with four and five year old trees should be his. By that time, with proper cultivation, it would be in full bearing. It would be a trial of his mettle.

But then again the pleasures he had turned his back upon, the social delights, the temptations so seductive to youth! Could he leave them all for five long years? If so, for his sake she would try to be content, willing to make her little part of the sacrifice if she could save him. And her father needed the recuperative influence of the climate. If only his failing health might be built up, the shattered fortune would prove a blessing in disguise.

So she was her brave, strong self again when the boys came back. Tom was loud in his praises of the mule, and Russel was laughing at

Cole's queer speeches. Bustling about, opening boxes, finding the things that were not needed and searching for those that were, gave an edge to their appetites.

The negro went upstairs and to bed. Tom found a hiding-place for his gun and fishing-tackle. Perhaps Tom was the happiest member of the family in their altered circumstances. All he wanted was plenty of room for sport. He had promised them unlimited supplies of partridges and rabbits, and had heard that the lakes were full of trout.

"I'm going to like it, I promise you that, Stell," he said, as she was making up a couch for him in a little room adjoining the hall, "and I'm glad I've got a jolly lot of tools. I say, sis, do you suppose uncle had any sort of an idea of this palatial mansion? Look at the cracks, — big enough for a young alligator to crawl in. I've told the fellows in New York that I'd shoot one and send it on. You can sell their hides for a good bit of money, — and then it is something to brag of."

Russel's meditations were of a different and more sombre kind.

"A fellow might as well come here as anywhere, when his governor has gone under. Poor father! he has tried his best, — lived only for his children, — and he could n't help the failure.

Well, I just don't want to see anybody from the East for five years, — or a paper even, — to learn all the jolly things I shall miss. If a fellow could only get rich in five years, why then he might go back and take his place in society. In five years I 'll have my grove. I 'll work now, and play then."

Stella laid her beautiful head on her pillow with a prayer for father and mother. To them this exile would be the hardest, for they were getting on in years; and so she asked strength of the all-wise Father to give up her young life to their happiness.

Then she looked round the forlorn room, lighted sombrely by the dying embers of the pine fire, and thought of her grand piano that must be sacrificed for their necessities. What wonder if a few tears fell, like tiny, red-hot coals, upon her hand!

CHAPTER IV.

"HIS NAME IS CAREW."

STELLA awoke with the first beams of the morning sun. A mocking-bird was singing outside the window. She had never heard one before, and as she listened to the rich notes, a new hope stole into her heart.

She rose softly, dressed, and opened the door which led upon the garden back of the house.

A delicious perfume greeted her senses. Near the door stood three magnificent oleander-trees, filled with crimson beauties of blossom. The rude lattice-work showed through vines of the Madeira rose covered with bloom. Near what seemed to be a well, grew a cape jasmine, said to be even more fragrant than the tuberose. All the ground was dotted with nodding wild-flowers.

With a cry of delight Stella stepped down into the path and looked about her. Great clumps of bananas of immense size greeted her vision to the right. A tall magnolia, past bloom, almost hid the eaves of the house on that side, with its profuse and glossy leafage.

The shining green-crowned trees, here, there, and everywhere, must be the old orange-trees her uncle had spoken of. Looking a little closer, she saw that they were loaded with their green fruit.

Farther on, the land was full of tall, flower-crowned weeds, and everywhere the choicest colors appeared.

"Mamma!" she said, as she met Mrs. Ainsley that morning, "I have made a discovery."

"You look so; have you found a gold mine?"

"Oh, better than that," said the girl; "come and see."

Mrs. Ainsley was as much delighted as her daughter could wish.

"It must be that papa will regain his health here," said Stella. "I have just thought — we will breakfast out here on this broad veranda. Is it not a treat, this delicious air?"

"I hope there is a well on the place," said Mr. Ainsley, as Tom carried his rocking-chair to the veranda.

For answer, Tom brought him a goblet of sparkling water.

"Then there is a well?"

"Yes, forty feet deep; stoned in to the top," said Tom. "Cole tells me it's a natural well. If that's the case, Nature employs first-rate masons. There's a big cistern besides."

"That makes up for this old shell of a house," said his father.

"This old shell of a house can be made pretty decent, let me tell you, with my tools," said Tom.

"I'm afraid you are not much of a carpenter, my son," his father said, smiling.

"You just wait," said Tom.

A loud "hieu!" twice repeated, sent them all to the door.

There on a beautiful brown mare sat a tall man, whose red curly locks peeped from under a wide sombrero, and from whose Mexican saddle hung a basket, which he swung dexterously off.

"Howdy, strangers? Glad you got here safe; glad to see you in Floridy. Like enough you've hearn my name — Cracker Joe — 'fore you started from New York. The old Fenn house wor my property."

"Will you come in, sir?" asked Stella, whose soft brown eyes seemed to impress the stranger, very impressible as to womanly beauty.

"No, thanky. I wor down to the station last night till nearly eleven, 'n' then th' come a telegram sayin' that the train wor ditched, 'n' would n't be in till morn'n', so I put for home. My wife wanted me to take ye all up there; but bless ye, a ride o' five miles at midnight might scare up a chill 'n' agur! Provoked enough I wor to hear the

whistle when I 'd got half way home. I know how 't is ; new folks git kind o' skittish, comin' in the night, 'n' I 'm real sorry I did n't stay half an hour longer. No matter for the basket — keep it till called fer." And with a low bow and a smile for Stella, Cracker Joe rode off.

Stella opened the basket. A snow-white napkin, lifted, disclosed delicious fried chicken, a loaf of bread, a can of milk, and two dozen eggs. Another little napkin covered a large, cool, green leaf, inside of which was a yellow pat of butter.

"I call that neighborly," said Russel. "Who did he say he was, — Cracker Joe? Well, that 's odd enough. Joe what, I wonder?"

"His name is Carew," said his father. "He is the largest landed proprietor in the county, and the richest planter, almost, in all Florida."

"Well done!" said Russel; "if he has attained that distinction in spite of crooked grammar and a cracker dialect, what may *we* not do?"

"I shall never forget this kindness," said Mrs. Ainsley. "I only hope they may be nice people."

"I am sure they are!" said Stella, with enthusiasm. "Who but a woman with the instincts of a true lady would have thought of sending us a breakfast at this time in the morning? How I should like to see and thank her!"

"No doubt you 'll have an opportunity very soon," said Russel, laughing.

"I say, if he is rich, he must hunt and fish no end," spoke up Tom. "I mean to cultivate him."

"I would," said Russel, still critical, "especially in his grammar."

"Now, Russ!" said Stella, "I'm ashamed of you!" and her beautiful brown eyes flashed. "Like mother, I shall never forget this kindness to strangers in a strange land."

After breakfast Mrs. Ainsley and Stella went over the house, leaving Mr. Ainsley with the latest paper they had brought from New York.

It was a poor tenement at best; and yet the rich brown and yellow of the pine, the gnarled and knotted timbers, gave it a certain picturesque beauty that would have compensated in the eyes of an artist for its inferior architecture.

A loud hurrah brought them to the door. Russel and Cole were there with their third and last load for that day.

"I guess somebody tucked in a few extras here and there," said Russel, pointing to a firkin of butter, a box of hams, and a cask of syrup. "It must have been uncle; he 's a trump, he is! And Cole — that 's the negro here — tells me that somebody who cropped here this season put in an acre of Irish potatoes and left. They only want care to turn out well. He says there are other vegetables in fine growing order, and peach and pear trees round the house, in bearing."

"And there's a plough in the barn," said Tom, "a first-rate one, and a packing-house and corn-crib over in the field. Russel is going to keep on Cole; he will teach us to farm."

The negro, who had just come in, grinned as he heard this speech, and looked at Russel's dainty hands and the great seal ring that shone conspicuously on one of his fingers.

By noon one would hardly have known the room so bare and comfortless only the night before. Bright little pictures smiled down from the walls, books were set along the rough ledges, tiny tables, music-racks, and racks for pictures, two easels with paintings, rugs small and large, and the brilliant yellow red of a pitch-pine blaze over all, made it, with its accessories of natural color, a picture of itself not unworthy the painter's skill.

Mrs. Ainsley's little work-stand stood by the hearth, her arm-chair and "father's" faced each other, and all things took on the familiar aspect of home.

CHAPTER V.

"EVERYBODY KNOWS OLD SQUEER!"

THE dusk was just coming on when a powerful gray horse with a substantial buggy attached stopped at the door.

"Visitors already!" said Tom; "hurrah for Florida!" and Stella went into her room to remove her apron.

Russel went to the door. A man stood there whose most salient point was a pair of enormous blue spectacles, that sat astride his nose with an air so provokingly officious that one was seized with a desire to knock them off. His hat was aggressive; so was his collar. The first was felt, half covered with a band of crape; the second stood round his bristly chin like a fortress.

"Howdy?" he said, as Russel presented himself; "new family, I see."

"Yes, sir, new to Florida," said Russel, respectfully, flinching a little under the steady gaze of the spectacles and the cold gray eyes beneath them.

"Folks all well?" and the little man's shabbily-gloved fingers played nervously with his watch-chain.

"Pretty well, thank you; how are yours?" asked Russel, entering into the humor of the thing, as he thought, though he was utterly unprepared for what followed.

"Well, thanky, thanky. My darter M'randy's all the family I've got at present; she's tol'able."

"Won't you come in?" asked Russel, anticipating unlimited fun in the interview, should his invitation be accepted.

"Well, no, thanky; 'nother time," was the quick response. "I — a — that is — p'r'aps you did n't take none o' my goods long o' yours."

"Your goods, man! Why, no;" said Russel, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Well, you see, what I mean is this — that is — well, you did n't see a kag o' butter, 'n' a box o' hams, 'n' a cask o' syrup? One o' my neighbors told me he seen 'em thar this mornin', 'n' I went down arter 'em jest now, 'n' could n't find 'em nowhar. Now per*haps* —"

Russel's face had been slowly growing crimson.

"Why, it can't be possible that I took your goods for ours, can it? I thought those things were packed in New York. I thought my uncle added them. Yes, we've got them all. I'm very

sorry, but you will readily see it was a mistake. I certainly thought they were ours."

"Sartain," said the man, slowly. "'Stakes 'll happen in the best reg'lated fam'lies sometimes. Don't 'pologize;" for Russel had opened his lips again.

"I 'll have them brought out at once," said Russel. "Luckily we did n't open them, though we intended to to-night; then we might have discovered the mistake."

He went in-doors.

"Stell, we have made an awful blunder," he said in a half whisper, — "brought home another person's goods."

"Oh, dear! what a pity!" said Stella. "It looks — queer!"

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Ainsley. Stella explained. Mrs. Ainsley's cheeks grew rosy.

"Why did n't he go after them sooner?" Russel ejaculated. "They came last night."

By this time Cole had the things on his head and in his hands. Russel went out and helped put them in the buggy.

"I 'm very sorry," he said. "If I had looked a little closer, I should have seen the name."

"Never mind, so long as I 've got the goods. I *hev* lost things afore, and never found 'em agin. Seems 's if this yer house —" And there he made a dead stop, exhibiting no little embarrassment.

"G' 'long, Jess, git!" said the man; and the powerful gray seemed to fly as she put to her strength, while Russel went back into the house, crestfallen.

"Whoever he is, he owns a splendid animal," said Tom. "What's his name?" he asked of Cole.

"Dat's ole Squeer," said the negro, with a curious chuckle. "He's name Beloit. Everybody knows ole Squeer."

"Rich, is n't he?" asked Russel.

"Reckon he are; but he's mighty near, folks says. Puts away lots o' money; got almos' de bes' grove in town. But bress ye, he's a quare man, is de ole Squeer. Ain't nobody likes him, fur's I knows."

"I wish we had n't taken the things, though," muttered Russel. "Cole, who lived here before we came?"

"De Fenns, — Mistis Fenn, Mars Fenn, an' de six or seven little Fenses. Dat ar wor a fam'ly — ky!"

"Why, what kind of people were they?" asked Russel.

"Mighty shif'less; good fer nothin' 'cept livin' off dar neighbors," said Cole. "Dey owes me a y'ar's wages; but dey cl'ar out, 'n' I could n't git nothin' but de ole house to sleep in."

"Who are the other neighbors?" Russel inquired, thinking of what the old Squire said.

"Well, de n'arest — le' me see — dar 's Hummit George, ole Mars Hickson's grandson, — he 's n'arest on de east. Ole Mars Hickson own all dis yar settlement once, but Cracker Joe, 't all b'longs to him now."

"Why do they call him a hermit? Does he live in a cave?" asked Russel.

"Ain't no caves round hyar, — no, not zactly," said the old man, slowly. "He 's a gen'l'man, he is, 'n' he 's got a mighty fine place; but he gin'ly keeps to hisself; neber goes to chu'ch; neber goes nowhar, on'y ridin' on his mar' — dat ar mar' wuth a thousan' dollars; 'm, dat is a critter!" he added, with various gestures of admiration. "Right fine grove he got, too, barin' trees. Oh, Hummit George right smart well to do!"

"Then I suppose if he is such a recluse, he won't call," said Russel.

"Never calls nowhar," said Cole. "Folks says he dassn't; dono why."

"We 'll pass him. Who is the next one?"

"On de lef', dat 's Mistis Beck — 'n' a odd un she be, too. She 'll jest borry de top o' yo' head 'n' de soles o' yo' feet, ef you could lef her hab 'em. De Knowltons come nex'. Dar house closed up, case dey 's gone to de oder side de worl', all but de eldes' son, 'n' he 's too delikit to trabble; so he 'm stays long o' Mistis Beck. Den 'bout fo' miles roun' you 'll fin' de Chestnuts,' n'

Deans, 'n' Haynes, 'n' Beadlows, — all de fustest sort o' people from ole Georgia, 'n' Lousany, 'n' sich, what wor rich *as* rich befo' de wah. *Dey* 'll all call, I reckons."

"Hope they 'll come in single file, then," said Russel, much amused. "I had an idea we were in the wilderness, and it turns out that we have none but first families from the fine old Southern States. How about Cracker Joe? People here think a good deal of him, don't they?"

"Well, dey doos, consid'able, 'n' more 'n dat, muchover. Don' know 'bout de niggers hereaway, but I guesses dey 's proud of him. He 'm 'mighty smart cracker, Joe am — peart, 'n' ginrous, 'n' plucky, 'n' rich. Golly! ain't he rich? Ef dar wa'n't nothin' else, specs dey 'd fall down 'n' wuship he, same as dey done de gol'en calf in Moses' day."

CHAPTER VI.

"WHY DON'T YER BOB?"

"THEM hens I valled higher 'n' any I ever did hev," said Mrs Dunn, in a plaintive voice.

She was a lank, pasty-faced woman, with some faint remains of beauty, whose slowly-moving, pale-blue eyes looked out from under a large, faded, pink sun-bonnet.

It was not often Susan Dunn made a visit to her nearest neighbors. The care of eleven children and her bodily ails kept her close to her own chimney-corner.

Mrs. Joe was bustling about as usual. She had been cutting out cloth for the children's clothes, and the sewing-machine stood ready for action.

"Tell Derry I've got some sewing for her. Can she come up this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Carew.

"Well, I reckon," said Susan Dunn, pushing back a lock of hair that had strayed to her sallow cheek. "She'll alleys come here when she kin."

"Your little boy looks better," said Mrs. Joe, nodding towards the child.

"Yorksher, make your manners!" said the woman, in an awesome voice, as the boy stood with mouth and eyes wide open; "make your manners, I tells ye!"

The youngster thus addressed failed to respond; whereupon his mother caught hold of his head and jerked it, with the admonitory ejaculation, —

"Why don't yer bob, when I tells yer to? He's ginerally so quick 'n' quisitable, Miss Luce, that I rap him fer too much tongue." Then she proceeded to take a pipe from her pocket, filled it, and putting it between her lips, began her lamentation again, —

"Them hens wor the best I ever hed, — the most val'able."

"What hens, Mrs. Dunn?" asked Mrs. Joe. "Don't sit there with your bonnet on; be neighborly. Stay to dinner, won't you?"

"No, 'bliged ter yer. I put my cow-peas on to bile, 'n' Jim, he'll be hum, 'n' if I ain't thar he'll raise Jamaica pepper or Jerushy ginger, I don't jest know which. But them hens! never seen none to match 'em — reg'lar upper tens! Well, you know I never did hev any but commen, sort o' cracker hens; but old Jenks, he give my man a settin, 'n' he hed good luck a hatchin',

'n' so them hens wor valyble, 'n' I declar' to gracious, I would n't 'a' let any one hev 'em *except* on your recommend. I 'm kind o' sorry, though, I sold the hull two dozen."

"Whom did you sell 'em to?" asked Mrs. Joe. She had utterly forgotten Mrs. Beck's visit.

"Why —" and the woman stopped puffing, waving her left hand to and fro to clear away the flies, while she held the pipe with her right, — "to thet bold, black-eyed furriner, lately come to Wild Rose, over thar. Beck, ain't thet her name? She said you 'd be 'sponsible, 'n' gin me your name 'n' a writin' for me to let her hev my hens."

"A writing? I never heard of such a thing!" said Mrs. Joe, indignant. "A writing? Did n't she pay you?" and her bright face clouded.

"Nary a cent, Miss Luce; but as you sent her, why, I let 'em go. Derry, — she reads ritin', you know, — she said it wor all right."

"I can't understand it. I never wrote a word for her — not a word."

"It wor on a kyard — Derry said so — Derry reads 'ritin', you know — one o' yer 'm kyards you go visitin' with," said the woman, lifting her plaintive voice a trifle higher.

"A card — oh!" and Mrs. Joe remembered that her visitor had asked her to give her a card on which she had written her name. "Why,

what a wicked woman!" she half gasped. "Did she leave the card with you?"

Mrs. Dunn shook her head, flapping the huge cape-bonnet.

"Of course not; that would have betrayed her; she was too cunning for that. Then she didn't pay you! I wonder she dared to use my name!"

"Deary Lord! well, she's got 'em, got the hull of 'em," said the woman, with heart-broken emphasis, knocking her bonnet off in her agitation, and displaying a frowzy head untouched by comb or brush, the gray hair standing out in all directions, except where it was fastened in a tangled knot at the back of her head. "Derry read the kyard, — she 's quite a scholard, you know, — read it right off, or I 'd never 'a' let 'em gone; they wor what I depended 'on to pay off fer Mandy's funeral;" and she ended with a groan.

"What did you ask for them?" was Mrs. Joe's next question.

"Thirty cents apiece, 'n' dirt cheap at that; they wor extrys, 'n' Jim says ought to 'a' ben fifty. The critter jest looked 'em out 'n me; powerful eyes she 've got, — creepy eyes; 'n' so — well, I let 'em go. You don't think I've lost 'em? We're so pore!" And she began moaning and groaning as she rocked to and fro.

"No, you have not lost them, Mrs. Dunn, for

I will pay you, as it seems she saddled the debt on me; Joe will make her pay it back, — along with the money for other things. He 'll get it, if he goes to law about it; because I believe it is swindling. She owes everybody; I suppose we must come in for a share of her regards. Two dozen — thirty cents — that is seven twenty. Lucky for you that I have got it by me; but it would be too bad for you to suffer."

"Thanky, Miss Luce — Lordy yes — seems 's if we can't git along. Jim he 's ailin', 'n' one or t' other o' the chil'n 's down with agur most of the time, 'n' I 'm powerful weak, 'n' nobudy to holp me, sense Mandy died. Seems 's if A'mighty mout 'a' spared Mandy. Ef ther' wor any whar else to go to, we 'd go, sense the craps turned bad, 'n' we don't hev nothin' but rain 'n' sickness, sickness 'n' rain. Either we wus n't made fer the world, er the world wus n't made fer us."

"Oh, well, you must n't give up, Mrs. Dunn; never give up."

"Go to 'stracted meetin'," said a deep voice, "'n' git shut o' all yer triles, es I do."

"Lord, Pruny, you 're alles puttin' in yer oar!" said the startled woman, as she met the deep dusk orbs of Aunt Pruny. "Them things is fer niggers, not fer 'spectable people, white folks, like Miss Luce 'n' me. She knows I come o' good stock, ef I air low down enough now. My

great-grandther owned a hundred sech niggers as you."

"I'd ruther be owned then a po' white!" snapped Aunt Pruny, setting a covered dish on the table, and a plate of gingerbread, beside which she placed a pitcher of milk and a mug. "I'm de Lord's free woman now, though, 'n' I'm 'turnin' good fer evil, fer I'm settin' dis sher table fer you."

"I reckon you're only 'beying orders," said Mrs. Dunn, looking hungrily at the good things as she put the money in the corner of her dirty handkerchief, and the whole in her bosom. "Thet money 'll jes finish payin' fer Mandy's buryin'. On'y think, Miss Luce, that gal wor seventeen the day she died, 'n' she did all the work, 'n' kep' up all the craps, 'n' minded all the chil'n, 'n' made all the bread, 'n' tended to me when I'n sick, 'n' everythin'. Mandy was wuth my two hands, 'n' my hull body, 'n' I tell you I'm jes lost 'thout her, 'n' thet's the livin' truth."

"It was a great loss, it must have been, Mrs. Dunn," said Cracker Joe's wife, sweetly; "but the other girls are fast growing to take her place. Sit up and eat something, — it's only a snack, — but you won't stay to dinner."

"No, thankee," the woman replied, addressing herself to the food; "but ther' ain't one o' them gals ekel to Mandy, Miss Luce. They're fer

ketchin beaus, 'n' wearin' beads 'n' breastpins, 'n' sich. Mandy never cared fer no adornin'. Gin her a caliker to her gownd, 'n' a broom to her hand, 'n' ther' she wor. It wor jest a comfort to see her work. My man, I dono 's he 'll ever git over it."

During this time she was eating and drinking, her pipe laid beside her on the table, the boy like a hungry bird, all beak, receiving now and then a morsel on the end of her knife or a drink from her mug.

Meantime Mrs. Joe, who was as impulsive as she was good-hearted, was half regretting her fit of generosity, and thanking her good stars that the money had been her own. She was quite sure that Joe would never have countenanced her paying the debt, though he might have given Mrs. Dunn the money; but she could not bear the thought of the suffering its loss might entail on the struggling family.

Jim Dunn did not bear a good reputation in the community. It was rumored that he was connected with a gang of illicit distillers, though as yet there had been no proof of the assertion. Yet at certain seasons of the year there was more money in his hands than he could possibly realize by his crops, and both he and his wife were known to be often under the influence of whiskey.

CHAPTER VII.

"MUCH NEIGHBOR HE!"

THE meal concluded, Mrs. Dunn pronounced it good, and without any other acknowledgment, gracious or otherwise, her visage still wearing a woebegone expression, bade her hostess farewell, pulled on her faded pink sun-bonnet, took her offspring by the hand, and hurried down the sandy road, after promising to bear Mrs. Joe's message to Derry.

Here and there a stunted orange-tree, a clump of yellow-leaved bananas, a field of feeble-looking corn, marked the few enclosed acres of the weak-limbed, weak-minded cracker, Jim Dunn, who stood awaiting his wife in the doorway of their dwelling, sallow, dark almost as a negro, with hollow eyes deeply circled with the evidences of frequent "chills 'n' agur," his nose sharp, his mouth drawn in, his figure bent and insignificant.

The cabin contained one large room and a loft. At one end of the lower apartment three beds stood, partly concealed by three ragged curtains that could be drawn back at will.

A table near the fireplace was hinged to the wall, that it might be easily put out of sight if needful. Now it was covered with brown, cracked dishes, the largest of which held a goodly portion of bacon swimming in grease.

Shouts and laughter told of unrestrained revellings that threatened to change into a quarrelsome *mêlée*, as they almost always did.

"I can't keep 'em stiddy, Susan; I'm too weak," said Jim in a plaintive voice, as the shouts redoubled.

"*I'll* see ter 'em," responded Mrs. Dunn; and her stormy entrance compelled silence.

"I'll thrash all o' ye 'thin a inch o' yer lives, ef yer don't stop this yer racket, 'n' Mandy scarcely cold in her grave yit, you varmints!"

At mention of the dead girl order was restored: it was her best weapon of defence. Counting heads as they gathered round the table, — there being only a chair apiece for the elders, — the bright curls and blue eyes of little Wash, a boy of seven, were missing.

"Whar's Wash? who on ye's seen Wash?" asked the maternal Dunn, as she started from her seat. "I thought I on'y counted ten."

"La, ma," said Derintha, the oldest girl, who had picked and sold berries all the month in order to buy the too yellow chain and locket that hung from her pretty throat, "I reckon he's

over to nex' neighbor's, Hermit George. Every chance he do git he runs away over to thar."

Derintha's bold, bright eyes lowered their glance as she mentioned their neighbor's name, and a swift scarlet crept up her dark cheek. She was the beauty of the family, and very careful was she to maintain the prestige she had won among her own connections as well as outsiders. Few strangers but paused to look the second time at her round, dimpled cheeks, her wealth of bright hair, the eyes full of the sunny warmth of the South, the lissome figure and brilliant smile.

"Much neighbor he!" said Mrs. Dunn, scornfully; "never so much as stepped foot over the thrashold. He's a noutcast, as everybody knows; too nice fer us, 'n' not nice 'nough fer his betters. It use ter rile me when you wor forever over thar; seems if you wor demented to git with him, 'n' he put notions in your head did n't do you eny good; you ain't a bit like Mandy, 'n' thet 's the reason. I don't want George Washington spiled like you wor; so go over thar to onct, D'rinthy, 'n' fotch yer brother hum."

The girl needed no second bidding. Her eyes grew brighter, her color deepened, as she seized her hat, decorated with faded ribbons, and ran out in the hot sun. All the most pleasurable recollections of her childhood were connected with Hermit George.

When he had first set up his household gods in Wild Rose, seven years before, Derintha was a pretty child of nine, and child-fashion she had wandered over to his cabin, as he called it, and he had welcomed her winsome little face to his secluded home. It became an every-day story that little Derry was over to "that lonesome man's" plantation. The mother, occupied with her household cares, was too busy to trouble herself concerning the haunts of her children; but when it began to be rumored that Hermit George must of necessity have a bad record because of his avoidance of his fellows, the mother became anxious, and devised ways and means for keeping little Derry at home. But the child would not desert her friend. If they tied her to the bedpost, she would in some way release herself, until, finding that her manners improved and she was growing more docile under his fostering care, they let her go as she willed.

For four years she kept up this intimate companionship, learning that which unfortunately, however much it might elevate her mind and benefit her manners, could not fail in the end to make her dissatisfied with her surroundings.

It was to him she was indebted for writing a neat and even scholarly hand, and had the intimacy continued, he would in all probability have so shaped her life that she might have been a

fitting companion for a man like himself; but in her fourteenth year she was detained at home by the long illness of her mother, and at fifteen the shyness of coming womanhood taught her that transient visits were more suitable, though even at that early age she had learned to regard him as the noblest type of manhood, the best and nearest friend in the world.

Her childish passion for his brilliancy and beauty had strengthened with her strength and grown with her growth. Little Wash, a pretty child, very much as she had been at his age, had taken her place at the hermit's hearth; and sometimes she made errands there in the most ingenious fashion, oftener was sent after the boy, as she had been to-day.

Down the heavily sanded road she hurried, her heart beating almost to suffocation at the thought of seeing the one perfect face that enthralled her mind and imagination. Assuming a careless air, though her breath came short, a prey to the keenest dread mingled with the most subtile delight, she lifted the heavy wooden latch of the gate that led into the hermit's well-kept grounds, and walked between the rows of orange-trees laden with their green fruit, till she came in sight of the low-roofed cottage, more picturesque than those ordinarily seen, because the hand of taste had guided the Virginia creeper and the German

ivy over the bare walls and many trellises, and the design of the house was English in style, while inside and out the premises were kept painted and in good order.

As she drew near she heard a child's sob, then the rich voice of Hermit George sterner than its wont.

"You 'll thank me by and by for stopping you in such cruel tricks. Suppose you grew up, maiming and crippling the helpless things about you? Some day you might commit murder, and then — God have mercy on your soul!"

"What has he ben doon, Mr. George?" asked Derintha, made bolder by the sound of her brother's sobs. "I 'm sure he must be a great trouble to you, as he is to us at home."

"Oh no, Miss Derry," said the hermit, in his sad way, pleased at sight of her piquant, pretty face; "he has been a little thoughtless, that 's all. I caught him pulling the wings off a butterfly."

"You badness!" said the girl, her eyes flashing, at which the boy burst out again.

"There, there! stop crying now, my little man," said the hermit, running his fingers through his glossy beard; "I 'm sure he 'll never do it again."

"I 'm afraid he troubles you, sher," said Derry, raising her bright eyes and letting them fall again before they had reached the height of his broad shoulders.

"Not at all. I'm very fond of little Wash; and he likes me, I'm sure, even if I do have to read him a lesson now and then."

"Yes, I do 'm," sobbed the boy, "and I won't nev-never do 'm so no mo'."

"Say you won't do so *any* more, my boy," was the response.

"I guess you 'll hev to come home, Wash," said Derintha, holding out her hand. "Ma sent me to fotch you."

"All right; go, my boy, and come again when they can spare you," said Hermit George. And Derintha, her cheeks burning and her eyes like stars, led the child away.

"It 's a shame to call him names," muttered Derry, "when he is so good and gentle. My gracious! what eyes he 's got! and he called me *Miss* Derry! Nobody ever called me Miss Derry but him. I wonder why? Never I've seen any man like him, no, not in all the world; and what am I but dirt beneath his feet? Oh, if only I wor some great, grand lady! I'd be proud to be his friend just as he is. Look down on him! how could I?"

The boy cried out that she hurt his hand, squeezing it so.

"Sights 'n' sights of oringes he 's got, too! Everything grows fer him, 'n' nothin' won't grow fer father; 'n' father ain't lazy, on'y weak like.

He works all the time, father does. But then — father 'n' *him!* Why, he's a grand gentleman from top to toe. Oh, my! I wonder what does he call me Miss Derry for, exactly like I wor a lady? I wish to the Lord I wor — anything but a pore low-down cracker!"

When she reached home misrule reigned, as usual.

"You Derry, go 'n' draw a pail o' water," said her mother, her face red and frowning under the pink sun-bonnet. "Oh, dear Lord, how I do miss your po' sister! I never hed to ask her to git anything; she done it without askin'. She wor too good to live, she wor!"

Derry took the bucket reluctantly, and not without protest.

"'Mong all them boys! I vow I'd make 'em," she muttered. "'T ain't a woman's place; 'n' I reckon, lookin' at things now, ef she sees us, Mandy's glad nuff she *did* go, any way."

She bent over the cistern and saw a faint reflection of her blooming face.

"He certingly did call me *Miss* Derry," she murmured over and over again. "Oh dear — if — he — on'y — would — like — me — just — a — little! But then, he knows I'm a cracker, — we're all crackers, 'n' sech a big family! Spoze, though, he had done something that driv him here! Spoze he'd committed a crime! *I'd*

overlook it, when p'r'aps city-bred girls would n't. I 'd make it up to him so 't he 'd forgit to suffer." She sighed heavily as she lifted the water-pail.

"I wish I 'd never seen him, I do — never! — but then, who knows what might be? He called me *Miss* Derry." She brightened again. "And that pretty, pretty house, with the books and music, and he playing fit to draw the heart out of one!"

Once and again she spilled the water over her skirts; the pail was very large and heavy.

"I think, pa, the boys might do this!" she said indignantly, as her father met her with a tin dipper, anxious to get a drink of water.

"I 'm dretful weak, Derry," he said, in his deprecating way. "Seems 's if I growed weaker 'n' weaker."

"But I said the boys," spoke up the girl, sharply.

"Well, Derry, they jes ride right over me, 'cause I am so powerful weak," he repeated, with a strong nasal intonation.

"You ain't so powerful weak when you go 'mong them moonshiners, dad, though you may be after you drink their whiskey," said the girl impulsively, her breath coming quick.

At that the man's appearance underwent an instant change. His brows grew rigid as iron, while his eyes burned under them like live coals.

The dipper fell from his hands. He caught the girl by the right shoulder, setting his teeth together, and from somewhere about his ragged apparel he drew a heavy revolver.

"Don't yer cry! don't yer move, or I 'll kill yer whar ye stand!" he said, his voice suppressed and hoarse. "Come round sher." And he led her, white and trembling, so frightened and confused at his change of demeanor, so startled at the strength he suddenly displayed, that she could not have spoken if her life had depended upon it.

"Don't kill me, dad!" she found voice to say, as he dragged her to a vacant space where tin cans, old bones, bits of rope, rags, corn-cobs, broken glass, and crockery abounded.

"I 'll kill ye, s' help me! ef I ever hear sich words outen your mouth agin. Whar d' ye hear? how d' ye know? I mean, whar in the devil's name d' ye get that word?"

His grasp was like a vise, though he trembled from head to foot.

"I don't know — that is — I don't know what it means. I don't want to; only you do stay away from home, an' you *do* bring whiskey when you come back, 'n' you 'n' mother drink it, 'n' poor Mandy ust to cry 'bout it, 'n' say some time the law 'd come down on you; an' it *killed* Mandy!"

He was shaking her now, in the fury of his passion, with a vigorous right arm, and brandishing the other hand in her face, while his own features were convulsed with anger.

"Who told *her?* Somebody did. Come, out with it, or I 'll shoot yer down like a dog; and cry if yer dare, damn yer," he concluded.

The fugitive color swept over her face.

"Somebody 's told yer. I swear I 'll know. 'T wan't yer mother?" he growled between his teeth.

"No; it was Carew's nigger cook," said Derry, her teeth chattering, for he held the pistol very close to her eyes.

"That black devil, Pruny!"

He gradually released his hold, but his face frightened her. Pallor made him ghastly, and his eyes seemed to burn her.

"Look hyar," he said, a moment after; "if ever I hear yer say 'moonshiners' agin, or in any way bring in what I hev said, or what yer think about it, I 'll sartinly send yer into the other world before yer kin say yer soul 's yer own. Swear that yer 'll never speak of it agin."

"I do swear," said Derry, in a choked voice.

"Thar, get along o' yer; it 's as much as my life 's wuth to git excited in that way. My weakness is comin' on agin; git along;" and he followed, with his usual shambling gait.

The frightened girl went cowering into the house, and saying but little to any one, — she who usually sang and whistled and chattered, — only kissing little Wash two or three times when she put him to bed, crept round helping her mother, and finally retired an hour before her wonted time.

It was a clear, bright night, and she lay awake wondering and pondering over the strange incidents of the day. She did not yet know the real meaning of the word she had used to her father, only that in some sense it was connected with whiskey and drunkenness. But could her quiet, sickly father, and that furious man with vengeance in his eyes when he threatened her, be one and the same?

CHAPTER VIII.

"HOW DOES THE MONEY HOLD OUT?"

"WELL, pa, did you get your things?" asked Miranda, the Squire's daughter, as his big gray stopped at the Beloit mansion.

The girl stood under the spreading branches of a great mulberry-tree. She had been picking the berries, and held a small basket in her hand.

"Yes; did n't much expect to, though, when I found 'em missin'. Sure enough, them folks did git 'em."

"To the Fenn house, eh?"

"Yes; keeps up its reputation, don't it? I always did hate the place; there never was no good in it. The man 'ts there was a New York City merchant, but whether Jew or Gentile, I don't know. There 's a kinder smell of old clothes about it yet."

"Did you see any of them?"

"Yes, a young man 'bout eighteen, — new beau for you gals, — don't look no more fit fer Floridy then a baby. Queer if moneyed people *should* have got the place."

"But is there a young lady? They say she's a great beauty."

"Yes, I sh'd say there was; I jest caught a sight of her, 'n' a boy, a peart un too, I reckon."

"Would you go over and call?"

"Well, I 'd be kinder slow about it. They live in the Fenn house. It's got a bad name, and the folks 'll come in fer a share of it; gen'ly do. Wait a bit, 'n' see how often they come to borry; but, remember, *I* never lend."

"I heard they 'd been rich and come down in the world," said Miranda. She did not tell all she had heard, — that the daughter had been a beauty and a flirt, and the son so dissipated that he could not stay in college. She wanted to see them for herself. They were from the great city of New York, consequently there would be new fashions to copy without the aid of a fashion magazine; and as to the beauty, — every new face that made its appearance in Florida was prettier than the last, — Miranda did not believe in the beauty. She had flourished herself as a belle, and through the aid of tempting little feasts had managed to monopolize the few young men in the vicinity of Wild Rose. She wanted to find out for herself all the charms, accomplishments, and claims of her possible rival. Did she sing? she wondered. She herself had occupied the head seat in St. John's choir for the three years

it had been organized, — her hard, clear, bell-like voice, with not a tone of sweetness in it, ringing out to the schoolhouse, where a little band of Methodists met, and fairly breaking in upon their services. Did she paint? Miranda looked round the square, stiff parlor, on many a bracket of which stood monotonous, lead-colored plaques filled with impossible roses and curious delineations of the feathered tribe. Her pictures were all the stiffest of stiff copies. She was a copy herself of unique fashion-plates; even the picture hanging up between the two windows, representing her as an infant of seven, suggested the idea that she looked as if she were trying at that early age to be somebody else.

She did not approach the ideal of the real Stella Ainsley, or dream how her life was bound up in those she loved, and her heart centred in home.

"Are you really stronger, papa?" Stella asked one morning, nearly a month after the family had settled down to their novel mode of living.

"So much better that I feel like a new man," was his simple reply, as he put his desk in order.

"Then I am glad we came," she said, drawing a long breath.

He paused in the act of preparing some paper, and looked at her anxiously.

"It must be dreary for you, my darling," he said; "no society, no shopping, no driving, and no excitement save when Mr. Carew enlivens us with his cracker drolleries."

"If only you are better and mother contented, I ask no more," the girl said gladly. "This outdoor life pleases me; it is a continual picnic. Russel enjoys it, too. You should have seen him yesterday digging the potatoes! Such beauties! We shall never eat them all."

"And you had a caller yesterday."

Stella smiled at the recollection of her visitor.

"That prim little Miss Beloit! Yes. You 've no idea, papa, what hard work it was to entertain her. And there she sat, with that big hat, gone out of style for an age, and said 'yes' and 'no' and 'really,' till I thought I should go wild, until presently I spoke of New York, and she could talk of nothing but bonnets and gowns. Such company as that is more tiresome than none, don't you think? And I left such a charming book, to go down, — 'Old Ironsides;' just think of that, papa. It was by far the more interesting of the two."

"Stella, dear," said her father, laying a detaining hand on hers, "how does the money hold out?"

The girl had feared this question. Her eyes fell, her cheek colored painfully.

"I have just written to uncle," she said evasively. "He must sell the piano before long."

"Then it is almost gone; and oh, how helpless I am!" he added with a groan.

"Papa!" said Stella in a startled voice.

"I am going to write for one of the New York papers, whose editor is an old friend of mine," he went on, after a pause, "and I am sure if he finds my letters interesting, he will pay something for them; but it may be weeks before I shall realize anything."

"Oh, we can live, papa," said Stella, forcing back the tears; for that matter of money was becoming a very serious one to her, and no cookbook held the magical receipt of how to live on nothing a year.

"If we can only manage till the squashes and cabbages grow. Russel is so sanguine since the Chestnuts and Doanes called. They gave him points, he says. One of the Doanes made fifteen hundred dollars clear of all expenses on his vegetables last year; and Hermit George cleared two thousand in strawberries alone."

"Who is Hermit George?"

"I don't know. He seems to be a mysterious character, of whom all speak well, but speak strangely, as if he was one among but not of them. Russel is quite wild over the possibility of realizing solid silver on his crops. Why

should he not? But, you see — he must keep on Cole, and — "

"Ah! Cole is an added expense, in the mean time!"

"Yes, father; he must have rations — meat and meal — and ten or fifteen dollars a month. If only uncle could sell the piano, how much it would help us!"

"You had better tell him to take anything he can get."

"Oh, father! my beautiful piano!" The tears stood in her dark eyes.

"I know it, daughter; but any sacrifice rather than to get in debt."

"Stella!" called Tom from below.

"Tom wants me;" and glad to get away from the present painful reflections, she ran downstairs.

"See what I've got!" said Tom. He held up a net bag full of quails.

"Where did you get them, Tom?"

"Now, if that ain't a regular girl's question. Don't you see my gun? I shot them, of course."

"But, dear me! what can we do with them?"

"Eat them, feathers and all," said the boy, laughing. "It's well you came to the country to learn something; city girls don't know anything. Why, you take the feathers off and singe 'em, — I mean the birds, — and cut 'em open with a knife, and —"

"Stop!" Stella had grown deathly pale. "The poor little darlings!" she said, with a shudder. "And they were alive and happy this morning! You may fix them, since you seem to know so much about it, Master Tom. I won't touch them. It's mean and cruel to kill them."

"But did n't father say he wanted 'em?" asked Tom. "Only yesterday he said how he could relish a quail! It's not boy's work, anyhow; and I'm dead tired." He set his gun down. "All is, if you can't do it, mother must," he added.

"Mother shall not touch them. She never did such a thing in her life," said Stella, resolutely. "As if I would ask her! and I'm sure I don't know how."

"Don't your cook-book tell?"

"I don't care if it does," said Stella, with decision.

"Well, there's Cole. I'll bet you 'll only have to ask him."

"Don't talk slang, Tom, if you *are* in Florida;" but the cloud had left her face. Of course Cole would do it; had probably killed and cooked plenty of them. She put on her big straw hat and went out into the fresh, sweet air.

Nothing pleased her so much as to be among the delicately-scented shrubs and flowers.

Cole was ploughing the five-acre lot at the

back of the house, and from behind a big pine came Russel in his blue farmer's suit and light straw helmet, — a relic of his seaside frolics.

"I 've been budding the sour trees," he said, a genuine delight in the task making his face handsomer than even Stella had thought it in the city. "Chestnut told me how, and it's just the prettiest work you ever saw! Come here and see."

She followed him.

"It doesn't look much as it did when you stood laughing at our grove the first time you came here," said Russel.

"Because I couldn't see a tree," said Stella; "and to call that a grove! It did seem too ridiculous."

"Yes, but now it is ploughed and harrowed, you can see all the trees. Beauties they are, too, and every one alive. Since we began to plough, I declare they laugh at me for joy. See those little light-green leaves? they 're new shoots. And this is the budding."

Stella looked. There was nothing to be seen but a bit of string and a sliver of cut wood.

"It 's splendid work," said Russel, "you could do it; let me show you."

"Not now, dear," said Stella. "Tom brought home some birds. I don't know how to dress them; I thought maybe Cole did."

"Good for Tom! but I don't see how I can possibly spare Cole," said Russel. "I want this thing done and off my mind. However, you can ask him," he added quickly, seeing how disappointed she looked.

Stella went forward and called Cole. The negro stopped.

"Can you dress birds, Cole?"

"Dress birds, Miss!" and up went Cole's right hand wandering about his gray head. "What does yo' dress 'em in, Missy?"

"I mean fix them — get them ready for cooking," said Stella, laughing.

"Never fixed none o' dem t'ings, miss. D' ole ooman, when she live, she gone done all dem ar fixin's, 'n' I holp eat 'em," he added, with a grin.

Stella turned despairingly away.

"Can't mother do it?" asked Russel.

"Mother does n't know any more about it than I do," said Stella, and hurried back to the house.

Tom was fast asleep on a box lounge.

"No use; I shall have to go to 'Old Ironsides,' and learn how to do it myself," said Stella.

"Old Ironsides" was the family cook-book, in which receipts had been pasted for the last fifty years by the now dead and gone Ainsleys.

An hour after, Mrs. Ainsley came downstairs.

"What are you cooking that smells so nice, daughter?" she asked.

"Birds — quail," said Stella. "Tom shot them."

"Who dressed them?" asked her mother.

"I did," said Stella, with a little shiver.

"Why, Stella! why did n't you call me to help you?"

"I wanted all the glory myself," said Stella. "Did you ever cook them?"

"Never in my life!"

"'Then I can crow over you,' as Tom says."

"I think it would have taken my appetite away to dress them," said Mrs. Ainsley.

Stella said nothing, but she kept herself busy waiting on the table that day. Mr. Ainsley praised her, Russel said he had never tasted quail better cooked. Only Tom noticed that she hardly tasted a mouthful herself, and knew the reason why.

The work was done up for the afternoon. Mr. Ainsley had put aside his writing, and was dozing in his chair, when Stella burst into the room.

"Oh, papa dear — only see what I have found!" she cried.

CHAPTER IX.

"I THOUGHT YOU WORE MOTHER'S DIAMOND."

PAPA AINSLEY opened his sleepy eyes.

"Don't you know how often we have hunted for it," Stella cried, her eyes like stars; "and, oh! I'm so glad!"

"Where did you find it, dear?"

"In that old haversack, just where you or some one must have packed it away over a year ago, when I wanted it for my cabinet of curiosities. It will go into the cabinet of necessities, now," she said, laughing.

The article in question was a wash-leather bag six inches square. Mr. Ainsley opened it and emptied its contents into the palm of his hand. Out came eight or ten gold nuggets, and as many pieces of brown-gray stone full of the precious ore.

"It will save us, now, papa!" said Stella.

"Perhaps," was the response. "Poor brother Will! How he delighted to talk about his gold claim! I remember the day he brought these

and gave them to me for a keepsake. He never went back, poor fellow! he died of consumption."

Stella shuddered.

"How much should you think it was worth?" she asked.

"Will estimated it at more than two hundred dollars."

"But, papa, how can we get at the money?" asked Stella.

"Send it by registered package to your uncle; he will attend to it."

"That would take so long, papa, and we want the money now. We must not get in debt."

"Well, dear, think it over," said Mr. Ainsley. "I 'm very glad you found it. Anybody who knows gold — and that is unusually pure — will exchange it for coin."

Russel came in early that afternoon from the field.

"I wonder what you 'll say when I tell you something," he said to Stella.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I am responsible for your appearance to-night at a party at Dr. Gowan's."

Stella stared. She hardly believed the evidence of her senses.

"You promised that I would go to a party to-night, — a party!" she said.

"That 's about it," said Russel.

"Why, Russel! what were you thinking of? I never heard of such a thing in all my life. You know I would n't go on such short notice, and such an invitation," said Stella, flushing almost angrily.

"So I said to young Chestnut, but he laughed, and said that that proved we were new to Florida. It seems one or two persons decide upon an evening and where to go, and then send their invitations by the young men, often on the same day; some stranger has come, or some one wants to celebrate. So I promised I would go, and take you. I want you to see the fun."

"You *know* I can't go," said Stella, with decision; "you *know* I can't."

"I don't know any such thing; give your reasons."

"I never heard of anything so utterly ridiculous;" said Stella, with more than usual vehemence.

"Of course you never did; but what of that? People in Rome must do as the Romans do."

"Say something original," put in Tom, who was clumsily sewing a button on his shoe.

"Where do the Gowans live?"

"Five miles from here."

"For pity's sake! and you expect me to walk that distance?"

"You know better; the mule will take us, cheerfully. She has n't been worked so very hard to-day, and I gave her an extra feed."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, to expect me to go in a mule-team?"

"Unfortunately, that is all we have. I saw the Doctor and his wife in a cart the other day,—absolutely a cart. To be sure, they drove two splendid mules; but we can offset that with a wagon just painted, and a new harness. Well, all is if you don't go I shall have to break my word, and it won't add to my popularity."

"You can go," said Stella.

"I 'm not selfish. I won't go without you."

"Mamma, what do you think?" asked Stella; "it seems so preposterous."

"I think I would go," said mamma, quietly.

"I have n't anything to wear, except my two or three rich dresses. People don't dress much here, do they? I might wear my black silk, that is if I go," she added in a hesitating way.

"Put on the best you 've got, if you do go," said Russel. "I shall, if only to show that I have not quite forgotten the fashions of this world."

"I advise you to go, Stella, and wear a party dress," said her mother. "It will show respect for the lady of the house. I suppose she is a lady."

"Unmistakably," said Russel. "Her husband gave up a good practice in New York State to come here for his health. They 're rich, too."

"I 'd go quick enough if I could," said Tom, "if only to see the fun, as Russel says. You go, sis!"

Stella made the tea and emptied the rings of their muffins, quite undecided. It seemed to her beyond all precedent to go to a party on an hour's invitation. It goes without saying that she did not need to manufacture a dress for the occasion. What girl drifting from the scenes of her old triumphs to a more contracted sphere but preserves some of the evidences of once prosperous days? So Stella had brought several pretty dresses, thinking that in some way they might be of use. They were hanging up in her room in a Florida wardrobe, that is, a shawl made to do duty as a curtain, under which their splendor was hidden. A myrtle-green, trimmed with rich lace, a light-blue satin with painted panels, a rose-pink surah delicately embroidered, two or three lovely India fabrics, and one imported lace dress a little the worse for wear, — these offered her the opportunity of a choice; and as she laid them side by side her color rose as she recalled past triumphs. In this one she had met a young sprig of nobility who languidly complimented her on her resemblance to a transatlantic cousin. The blue satin recalled one particular German, after which a young *Cræsus*, with notable lack of brains, though he spent royally, proposed. How many recollections their pretty folds called up!

It was a long time since she had enjoyed a party dress. What girl of seventeen would not have felt her pulses quicken at the anticipation of such an event?

"It will be very different from a really grand affair, though," she said to herself, as she went downstairs looking so lovely in the lace-trimmed myrtle-green, with sprays of pink flowers fastened here and there, that Russel, who was also resplendent in a dress suit, declaimed in a stage aside,

"Star of the evening! beautiful star!"

"You never had that charming color in the city. Florida must agree with you. But come, our wag— Beg pardon, our carriage waits."

Long before they reached their destination they knew by the red flush in the atmosphere, deepening in the crimson light of the fat pine fires blazing on every hand, that the festivities had commenced. Music added its attractions; the sound of viol and flute, cornet and cymbals, came dreamily on the air, mellowed by the distance.

In every direction, as they drove up to the Doctor's residence, fire-mounds sent up their brilliant spirals, lighting the pine woods and clearings, and showing a perspective of teams, horses, and servants, the latter looking zealously after the welfare of every fresh arrival.

Stella, in a vague bewilderment, entered the handsome hall of the Doctor's modern villa, and was ushered into a spacious dressing-room, where the display of toilets as elaborate as her own made her late hesitancy as to whether the rusty black silk might not do, after all, rather laughable, as she thought of it, and looked about her at the lavish use of velvets, brocades, and costly silks.

Her spirits rose, as going downstairs she heard the notes of a favorite waltz, and saw in a brilliantly appointed room that the dancing had begun.

"Say, sis," whispered Russel, as, after numerous presentations, and a warm welcome from the handsome hostess, Stella stood by his side, "are n't you glad you came?"

Near Stella, almost elbow to elbow, studying her marvellously pretty dress with something near enough to envy to be first cousin, stood Squire Beloit's daughter Miranda.

The Squire himself was not far away, made conspicuous by his blue spectacles, and a collar so high that all the rest of him seemed hanging by the ears.

For the first time in her experience "Mandy" felt shy and uncomfortable in her best clothes. She had looked upon the Ainsleys as a broken-down family; and here were Stella and her brother conceded to be the best dressed and handsomest couple in the room.

It was later on that despair seized upon the heart of Miranda, when, after some little urging, — for she was really out of practice, — Stella sat down to the piano and played a brilliant sonata, far beyond the capacity of the Squire's daughter; and when she sang, — this new beauty, simple as a school-girl in her ways, and yet as brilliant as a woman of society, — all the other rooms were forsaken, and questions of, "Who is it?" and exclamations of, "What a superb voice!" ran from lip to lip.

Stella had never received such an ovation in her life, and was glad presently to escape to another room and rest awhile.

"Well done!" said Russel, as he took her fan; "you were positively overwhelming in that song; you outdid yourself. I never heard you sing so well."

"Ah, that is because, on previous occasions, you have always had somebody else's sister to rhapsodize over. I 'm very glad, though, after all my lack of practice, that I did n't fail. I 've been looking round for Cracker Joe," she added, as Russel used the fan vigorously; "perhaps he was not invited."

"What! the richest man in the county not invited! Oh, yes," said Russel. "He is out on the north veranda with a few gentlemen who think more of crops than capers. He won't join

the gay and festive throng inside because his wife is not here. You should have seen his face at the window when you were singing! That curly red head of his is not unpicturesque with his hat off, though in my opinion the hat improves him."

"Why is not Mrs. Carew here?"

"Children — measles, or something the matter."

"I wonder if Hermit George, as they call him, is here?" Stella asked. "I have a great curiosity to see him."

"Here! to be sure not; he never goes to a merrymaking, — in fact, gives society the go-by altogether; why else should he be called Hermit George? Hold your hand up again, — no, your left one. I thought you wore mother's ring."

"Oh, Russel!"

The girl's face had grown deadly pale. She stood looking down at her hand.

"Did I? I know I refused it once, — let me think. Yes, I did; mother overruled my objections. Oh, Russel! what has become of it? I would n't lose mother's ring for worlds! It belonged to her grandmother!"

"Well, don't worry, anyway. Sit down and get calm. You look faint. Think it over while I go for a glass of lemonade; there 's plenty in the dining-room. I remember you said the ring was rather large."

"Yes, and I took it off and wound a thread round it on the inside. I must have put it on again — did I?" And she pressed her forehead, excited and distressed by the loss beyond measure.

"See here, Stella; I believe you left it at home. Now, don't go to being miserable about it; it won't mend the matter. You sit here, and I 'll get the lemonade."

Stella rose to detain him, but he was gone. Then in a flash it came to her mind that on their way, when they were nearing the Doctor's house, she had felt the scratch of a burr on her palm, that it had troubled her more or less all the way, and that she had pulled off her glove to find it. Then the ring must have come off with the glove and fallen into the bottom of the wagon. If only it had not gone into the road, where the sand would bury it deeper and deeper!

Forgetting that Russel might be troubled if he came back and found her gone, forgetting all caution in the excitement of the moment, she threw on a light wrap, which, fortunately, she had carried with her, and ran out of the door leading into the yard, where the numerous vehicles were ranged side by side and length to length, the horses tied to posts and trees and fences. Not a soul was in sight. The negro servants were watching the dancers. Many of

the fires had burned out, one or two still emitted occasional flashes of red light; but there was no need of any artificial illumination, for the moon — round, white, and glorifying the whole grand arch of the sky, its beams shining over the broad expanse of forest and lake — sailed slowly along the broad, serene blue of the heavens.

Where was Russel's team? Somewhere on the outside of the others, she remembered. Gathering her dress up, she sprang lightly along in and out among the wagons, the horses looking at her with intelligent eyes, until she found herself in a tangle from which she could see no outlet. Two or three of the horses, young colts, became restive; she was able to avoid contact with them only by springing nimbly from one point to another.

"Oh, dear! what shall I do?"

The girl was a little frightened and very nervous. She had not been used to horses, and to find herself in the midst of so many, when she had thought to avoid them, was calculated to annoy and irritate a much more fearless person than Stella Ainsley. If she called out no one would hear her, for the revelry at the house was at its height, the music overpowered all other sounds, and the dancers were so engrossed with their pleasure that they had thought for nothing else.

Once more she exclaimed in really distressed accents, "What shall I do?" when a voice answered, "Can I be of any assistance?"

She had not heard the sound of horse's feet, because the sand was very deep just there.

Now, however, she saw a man leap from his saddle and take down the bars.

As soon as he made a way for himself he hitched his mare, led the most restless horse up toward the road, secured him and came back, hat in hand.

"You seemed to be searching for something," he said.

Surely she was not looking for this, — a face of such rare, manly beauty that it startled her, seeing it at such a time, in such a place, a face she had never seen before. Half dazed, she did not speak for a second or two, but stood and looked into eyes that looked as eagerly into hers.

"I — have lost my — ring;" she said, when she found voice to speak. "Happening to remember where I took off my glove, coming here, I came out," nodding toward the house, "on the impulse of the moment to find our car— wagon. It must be very near here," she said, conscious that her speech was somewhat incoherent, conscious that she was nervous and constrained, and almost angry with herself.

"Oh, I see it!" And she hurried forward, but was again under the necessity of claiming his guidance among the tangled crowd of wagons, buggies, and buckboards that the uneasy horses had jammed together.

They gained the place at last, and Stella, her cheeks burning, for she was now in a fever of anxiety, and apprehensive that she might have lost the ring on the road, availed herself gladly of his offer to search.

"It was very valuable, a family heirloom," she said, and then repented. Suppose this man were a thief, or in any way dishonest! Thieves and ruffians were sometimes handsome and gentlemanly; and here she was, a considerable distance from the house, in the guardianship of a stranger. But, no — she could not doubt his integrity; at all events she had placed herself at his mercy: she would not flinch now.

"I believe I have it," he said, after a brief search, and the blood rushed to her heart and back; and then came the faintness of reaction.

"It is a diamond!" he said; then, struck by her pallor, "you are not well, I fear," he added, as he handed her the ring.

Her fingers trembled so that she could not hold it without difficulty.

"If you will allow me," he said, in a sweet, low voice, his manner deprecating, almost timid.

She held her finger out mechanically. He slipped it on.

"You are better, I hope," he said, his tones anxious.

"Much better, thank you;" and she smiled, though the tears glittered in her eyes.

"If you will allow me, I will let the bars down here, and take you out this way," he said; "there is a gate that will admit you, farther down, in front of the house. I will see that no harm comes to you."

He unhitched his mare, saying, "Quiet, Byrnie!" and led her by the bridle.

"May I know who it is has been so very kind?" asked Stella as they neared the gate.

He smiled. Over his handsome face came a cloud of sadness like a veil, and his glance dropped.

"They call me 'Hermit George,'" he said simply; "I am George Barron."

Then he stood, hat in hand. He bowed, she said "Good-night," and they went their separate ways, each destined to remember that night and that meeting to the end of time.

"Stella!" exclaimed Russel, as he caught sight of her when she entered the hall, "I've been frightened to death. Where in Heaven's name have you been?"

For answer she held up her hand.

"You found the ring! In the wagon?"

"I — not exactly," said Stella, with a burning face. "A gentleman — passing by — seeing that I was in difficulty among the teams — I thought I could find our wagon, you know — got off his horse and helped me."

"Good heaven, Stella! do you know what a wild, reckless thing you did? Why did n't you wait for me?"

"I was so distracted, Russel; I thought if I could only get out in the air, — and so I went farther and farther, though I was sorry I did, for the horses were frightened, and I suppose I frightened them;" she laughed a little hysterically.

"Do you know who it was?" asked Russel, — "the man, I mean."

"Yes; he said they called him 'Hermit George,' when I asked his name," she replied, turning away a little that he might not look in her eyes. "You know I wanted to see him, and as chance would have it, I did."

Russel could not know how her heart was beating.

"Great Cæsar!" he exclaimed, looking at her as if she was something apart from him, or would be, after this; "why, that man is an outcast from his kind! A social Pariah."

"I can't help it if he is," she made light answer; "he found my ring."

She did not tell him that the hermit had himself put it upon her finger.

The dancers were called together just then by the master of ceremonies, who said, —

"Our good friend Mr. Carew has just requested us to give a dance with what he calls a cracker band, — the music, in fact, which they have when there is no other kind to be had for love or money, and the plantation hands play after the old Florida fashion."

As they all stood expectant, a line of negroes filed in, some with bread-pans, others carrying heavy sticks, one or two armed with shovel and tongs, others who depended upon their tongues, teeth, and finger-joints. These latter whistled and sang. One rattled a string of silvery sounding bells, two or three beat the tin pans, an improvised drum added to the clang and clatter, and the dance was called.

With much laughter and merriment the sets were formed.

"They want me to lead this dance," said Cracker Joe, turning to Stella, "and if Miss Ainsley will honor me by dancing with an old Florida cracker, I will."

"With pleasure," she said; and they led the dance to the singing, whistling, drumming, and clapping of the grinning darkies, who evidently enjoyed their own music.

Stella enjoyed the figures, though her partner's agility was more vehement than graceful; still, in his manner toward her he was delicacy itself, notwithstanding he cut old-fashioned pigeon-wings and used old-fashioned phrases.

Meantime the Beloits, father and daughter, discussed Stella.

"I don't like her one bit," said Miranda, with strong emphasis on every word. "She did just nothing but show herself off, and air her accomplishments, the whole evening long."

"Ruther pretty, M'randy, ruther 'n interesting gal," said the Squire, as he touched the flanks of the great gray horse with his long whip.

"Not a bit," said Miranda, sturdily. "She 's a doll, — that 's all she is. The idea of her dressing that expensive! Who ever heard of such extravagance? Somebody said that dress she wore must have cost a hundred dollars or more — and she living in the old Fenn house!"

"Sure nuff," said the Squire, meditatively; "but I did n't see 's anybody neglected you."

"Then you were the only one, pa. Why, the Chestnuts hardly said 'boo' to me, and the Kingsleys could n't do anything but talk about *her*. I declare I never was so thoroughly disgusted."

"Oh, well, I guess they 'll all come back 'fore long, piping fer their dinners," said the Squire.

"New folks must have their fling; but don't you forgit they live in the Fenn house, and the Fenn house hes a bad reputation."

With this wise speech Miranda was obliged to be contented.

CHAPTER X.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT?"

ON the following day Stella had a conference with Russel concerning the gold. Man like, he dreaded to talk about financial matters concerning the household expenses. He shook his curly brunette head.

"I 'm glad you found the gold," he said, "but what can you do with it? Such things are kept for curiosities."

"We can't afford to keep such curiosities," said Stella, wiping the last crystal dish and holding it up to the light unflawed. "We must exchange it."

"It will look exactly as if we were driven to desperation for the want of money."

"Well, are n't we? I am," said Stella, sturdily. "We are almost out of sugar, tea, butter — "

He held out his hands.

"An you love me, Stell, don't go any further. I don't believe there 's a poorhouse within a thousand miles. What are paupers going to do?"

"Well, I'm only telling the truth," said Stella, laughing.

"I am the virtual possessor of an orange-grove; and last night you were dressed like a princess."

"I know; but I can't eat my dresses. And besides, you would make me go. Two or three times I thought, 'If folks only knew!' But they did n't, and they shall not," she added, with fine emphasis. "Gold is money!"

"Yes, uncoined. Unfortunately the mint is outside of Florida."

"Well, if you won't try, I must. Since Eve, women have generally had to be the burden-bearers."

"Now, Stell, if you talk that way — Oh, hang it! I wish we had never come to Florida!"

"Nonsense! go out and hoe your orange-trees."

"I 'll stick there," said Russel; "but don't ask me to buy and bargain. I can't do it. Why don't you sell some of the potatoes? We can't eat them in six months."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I certainly am. They are quoted at a dollar and forty a bushel. Talk of being out of sugar!"

"Sure enough!" and Stella brightened. "Let Cole put four or five bushels in the two big bags I found yesterday. But I want the bags back again. Do you know, I had planned two such

lovely rugs! The burlap bags are just the thing to make them on. I'll speak to Mr. Willis; and as to selling the gold, it's not everybody, sir, who has gold to sell."

Russel turned half reluctantly on the threshold.

"I *would* do that for you, Stell, but circumstances over which I have no control — the accident of birth in a gentleman's family, the present state of my nervous system — all forbid it. I know it seems mean of me — "

"Go and take care of your grove," said Stella, laughing.

"I will — for the benefit of future generations. Oh! look here, Stella — " He had come back, and Stella paused in her glass-cleaning. "If I were you, I would n't mention that matter of the ring. It may not — sound exactly as it occurred. He's a magnificent fellow in appearance, and evidently high-toned in all matters pertaining to himself, but he is under a cloud; there's no doubt of it. Chestnut told me last night — well, he told me a queer jumble; there are songs without words, and stories too, I reckon. No man can lay a finger on what he has done, but there is evidently a ban upon him."

"I only told mother," said Stella, turning cold and hot as she looked closer at the tea-cloth she was folding; and there came a vision of a radiant face swift as wings cleave the air, and all the

common household things grew beautiful to her sight. Dreams and doubts and hopes and fears were to follow now in quick succession. Stella had found her fate.

Shaking off the delightful illusion that Russel's words had summoned, she put on her wraps and went down to the store, which was close by the station. In the same building was the post-office, presided over by Miss Moss, a small, stiff-jointed atom of a woman, who wore purple spectacles and a false front of very brown hair, while the rest of her head rejoiced in a suit of iron gray. A black silk apron over her spotless gingham dress, and short black mitts, constituted her unvarying costume. This mite of a postmistress had taken a fancy to Stella, perhaps because her lone heart had long craved the sunny smile and gentle voice with which the beautiful girl always greeted her.

"Any letters for me?" asked Stella in her bright way.

"Not one — really; too bad!" said little Miss Moss, with a beaming face, forgetting all her troubles at sight of the beautiful girl. "I wish there was; I'm always pleased when a letter comes to you, Miss Ainsley."

"Thank you," said Stella; "I did expect one to-day. Maybe to-morrow," she added hopefully.

"I 'll try to order it so," said the little lady. "I'll try to have a nice letter for you. I hope you still like Floridy, Miss. I 'm always so afraid new-comers will be disappointed, 'specially from the city."

"I do like Florida," said Stella, heartily; "we are all so well here. But I must go in the store. Be sure to have a letter for me to-morrow."

"I 'll order one; I 'll do my best to order one," was the smiling reply.

Stella went from there into the store. Mr. Willis sat at his desk reading a newspaper. There were two or three loungers at the other end of the store. Plunging into the matter at once, she emptied the little bag.

"Well!" said the grocer, "that 's a sight for sore eyes! There 's meaning in the saying 'yellow as gold.' It is gold, is n't it?"

"Yes, good gold," said Stella. "We thought this little bag was lost or stolen, and it came to light yesterday. There is really no use in its lying about the house, and I wanted to ascertain its value."

"Brush," called the grocer, looking over to the door facing the railroad, "come here a moment. He 's an old miner, Miss Ainsley. I can trust his judgment."

Forthwith a man with his hands in his pockets, a red handkerchief round his neck, and a pipe in

his mouth, came lazily toward the counter. The pipe he never smoked. It was his token that he had given up the habit, but "it felt kind o' good to draw on," he said.

"See here, Brush; you 're a good judge of gold," said the grocer.

"Well, I reckon," was the response; and he turned the pipe in his mouth till the bowl was upside down, probably to prove in a silent way that there was no "baccy" in it.

"What do you think of that?"

"Why, it carries me right back to Bear Mounting, whar I struck gold in '49, — best vein I ever see in my life. My mate, that 's old Bill —"

"Yes, I know; I 've heard the story of that trail, before" said Mr. Willis. "Then this is the real thing?"

"It could n't be realer; nice little chunks, them thar; wish I hed my pockets full on 'em."

"What is it worth, do you think?" asked the grocer, as the old man turned the nuggets over and over with a lingering, loving touch.

"Wal, there can't be less then a couple o' hundred, I sh'd think, 'n' mabby a good deal more 'n that. I hain't valleyd them rocks, only these little nugs."

There was a shadow on the counter. Squire Beloit peered eagerly over the old miner's shoul-

der. He seemed surprised at sight of the gold, but as he caught Stella's eye he walked uneasily and rapidly away, and stood on the doorstep.

At that moment a handsome team drove up to the door. Cracker Joe, his brown cheeks reddened by the drive and the clear, sharp morning air, his bright curls gleaming from under the great sombrero, looking more like an old Spanish picture than ever, flung the reins down, gave a spring to the ground, and came into the store. He had come in his "field regalia," as he called it, — a jacket, trousers of corduroy, a brown sash, that he always wore on duty, knotted about his slender waist, and boots that came up above his knees.

Involuntarily Stella thought of her paints and canvas as he stood for a moment limned against the dark green of the woods beyond. Carrying his forty-five years lightly as he did, she questioned if, gaunt and sallow though he was, there was not almost as much beauty in his face and figure, though of a different kind, as distinguished Hermit George. He certainly had splendid eyes, and a face that changed with every passing emotion.

"I should n't like to meet him in an angry mood," she said to herself as he lifted his wide hat and gave greeting with his customary "howdy?"

"What do you think of that?" asked the storekeeper; "you 're an old gold-digger too. Brush, here, has given his opinion."

"Ah!" and he drew a long breath, his eyes flashing; "that 's about the color of it. Ever in a mining country, Miss?"

"Never," Stella made answer; "my uncle found this in his claim, I think they call it, when he was in Arizona."

"It 's a purty sight;" then, instinctively conscious that he might be in the way, he turned to the grocer.

"Cap, put up a couple o' barr'ls o' flour," he said.

"I sh'd think you 'd be afeared to let them hosses o' yourn stand 'thout tying," said the Squire.

"'Afeared'! I 'd make 'em afeared if they did n't stand. They know what they 'd git if they moved an inch. Critters is under discipline at my place; 'n' there 's some human critters I 'd like to put under discipline too," he added, casting a glance aside at the Squire as he left the store.

The grocer made a favorable proposal, and Stella, outwardly calm but inwardly delighted, accepted it, after due consideration.

"I would gladly have taken fifty dollars for the whole," she said afterward to her father.

Emboldened by success, she spoke of the potatoes, and found a ready purchaser.

Stella made out a list of groceries, which Mr. Willis promised to send to the Fenn house, and started to walk home. The sun was hot, the sand was heavy. Cracker Joe stood on the step of the store talking caressingly to his horses, who pricked up their ears at his voice.

"Purty warm day," he said. "Is your father at home? I 'd like to see him on a little matter o' business."

"He is at home," said Stella. "What beautiful horses! and how still they stand!"

"Yes," he said slowly, his deep-set eyes kindling, "a horse *is* a knowin' critter. His instinct tells him when the man who handles him is the better brute of the two," he added, laughing. "Now, ef you 'll jest ride behind 'em — Would you?"

"Indeed I would," said Stella; "but how in the world am I ever to climb into that wagon?"

"Ef you 'll 'low me, Miss;" and in a moment she felt herself lifted and as lightly swung up to the high seat as if she had been a feather.

"How in the world did you do it?" she asked, laughing.

"Practice, Miss. My little wife never troubles herself to climb into a carriage when I 'm by. You 're jest her size;" and presently they were flying, it seemed to Stella, toward the house, which she entered feeling very much like a gen-

eral who has come off victorious in a hundred engagements.

Russel saw her coming, and met her in the living-room. He could not divest himself of the idea that she must think him cowardly for thrusting upon her what seemed clearly his business.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself," he said, bending over her slight figure and looking into her lovely face. "I 'm afraid I 'm a born shirk."

"Don't worry over it, Russel," she said, good-naturedly. "On the whole, I think it was better for me to go. I 'm rather glad. Mr. Willis allowed me groceries to a large amount, and will give me money for the rest of the gold."

"You don't say that!" said Russel.

"I do say exactly that."

"Stella, you 're a trump! Let 's have a dance;" and together they whirled about the room, now laughing, now singing, till Tom came running in to see what was the matter.

CHAPTER XI.

"ON'Y HOPE 'T WON'T MAKE A TALK."

WHEN Stella left, looming up on the seat of the high wagon, and chatting in her merry fashion with Cracker Joe, Squire Beloit went to the door and strained his weak eyes gazing after them.

"Looking for somebody?" asked Mr. Willis.

The Squire drew a long breath.

"The idee of drivin' off with *him!*" he muttered.

"She might have walked to Jericho before some men I know would have had the politeness to ask her to ride," said the grocer.

The Squire winced.

"On'y hope 't won't make a talk," he made answer.

"Don't you worry, Squire. I'd trust any of my folks with Cracker Joe. His reputation for honesty is solid."

"Wal, mabby 't is," said the Squire; but he shrugged his shoulders "in a way that made me mad," Mr. Willis said, when telling the incident to his wife.

"Heard anything o' them Renshaw p'taters lately?" asked the Squire.

"No," said the grocer, shortly.

"Must be extrordinery," continued the Squire, placing his foot on a cask of nails and resting his elbow on the counter; "I've heern o' farmers givin' a dollar a pound."

"More than I'd give," said the grocer, looking over his ledger.

"Well, yes, *now;* they're prime p'taters, though. I've seen a few of them, 'n' they are mighty fine for seed. They're six dollars a bushel, though, 'n' I'm goin' to get about four bushel. It does seem a tarrible price, don't it, — twenty-four dollars for six bushel. But I'm a goin' to resk it, — goin' to send fer 'em this morn'n'. Ruther a bright young lady, that Miss Ainsley."

"'Rather'! She's the brightest and most beautiful girl I ever saw," said the grocer.

"Yes, everybody seems to be took with her," drawled the Squire. "Pity they live in the Fenn house!"

"Why so?"

"You know what I mean, course you do. Was n't the Fenns thieves 'n' liars from the head down?"

"What of that? Queer premises to reason from, I should say, — because the Fenns were

thieves and liars, the Ainsleys must be. I don't think I would air that idea of yours much. It might get to headquarters, and that young Russel is a tigerish sort of fellow, I judge, if he gets riled; he might consider such a speech as that an insult."

The Squire choked a little, and hemmed and hawed a good deal. Finally he counted out his money for the seed potatoes, and went over to the post-office to register the letter.

Meantime Stella was unwontedly happy.

"It is so good to have money enough!" she said to herself. And in her own room she would sit moments at a time, looking off into the distance with such shining eyes. And if started from her reverie by so much as the tap of a woodpecker on the roof of the veranda, the swiftest, prettiest blushes would mantle her cheeks. Then, still as stealthily, as though some one was on the watch to detect her in the act, she gathered her paints and brushes and began to delineate a face that grew day by day under her skilful touch — she was no mean artist — until it looked at her with the soft, serious, yet radiant eyes that had stolen her very heart out of her bosom on the night of her little adventure.

Often when by herself she would hold up her slim little hand that was a trifle redder than the canon of fashion requires, and a strange, sweet

light would come in her blue orbs as she whispered to herself, "He put the ring there, — and on the engagement finger! I wonder if he ever thinks of it?"

Then she would smile and blush in such a modest, girlish way; and Hermit George became a part of her innocent life, and his picture her greatest treasure. He might be banned, shunned by his fellows, a social outlaw, — whatever might become of him, wherever she might go, he would still be to her a beautiful memory.

CHAPTER XII.

"I HAVE HAD ONE SUPREME MOMENT."

"Coriander kar, coriander kink,
Lilly miss Rabbit go to git a drink,
Wolf in de water, could n't holp his sef,
Lilly miss Rabbit talk he to def,
Done got her pitcher bruk it on he head,
Lilly miss Rabbit git very red,
Stoop to de water come agin brown,
Fall in head fus, 'n' go right down."

SO sang black Canty, who lived with Hermit George in the capacity of cook and man of all work.

"Huh! chu! dis yer poke de longes' time a frizzlin'!"

Round and round the room in a sort of noiseless clog dance, with more cortortions of face to the minute, more jerking of the elbows and snapping of the fingers than ever the most agile circus clown could compass in the same time, then back to the frying-pan, his long fork in his hand, turning the spluttering meat, and the corn-meal cake at its side, as it changed to a crusty brown, that

in spite of the hissing fat, looked toothsome, and then with

"Coriander kar, coriander kink,"

the agile negro went the rounds of the kitchen again, bringing up as before at the frying-pan.

Dark and ugly, with an enormous head from which the thick wool stood out in three pyramids, "Hermit's Canty," as he was called, had been in the service of George Barron for ten years. In fact, he was the son of an old family slave.

Except when behind the plough or wielding the hoe, Canty was a perpetual and inveterate dancer. Even in the meetings where he was held in high esteem as a singer and exhorter, a service was never concluded without an exhibition of his superior agility. It was said, with how much truth I know not, that he had once sung an entire verse through, standing on his head, while he kept time with his feet, to the intense admiration of a large and devout congregation. If some of the stricter sect remonstrated, his answer was invariably the same, —

"Did n't Moses dance 'fore de Lawd? Don't talk. I 's subsidin', I is," which latter was one of his pet phrases.

Be this as it may, he was certainly a living proof of the possibility of perpetual motion, as

even in his sleep, it was averred, he was always going through the motions of dancing.

Hermit George had evidently become accustomed to the freaks of his sable servitor, but occasionally when the negro's frantic exercise reached his ear he would call him to order, to which the response would be, —

"Yes, Mars George, I 's subsidin', I is;" and he would go on more silently with his antics, till his pork was fried and his cakes cooked thoroughly.

The kitchen was separated from the main body of the house by an almost open platform. Then came the parlor, which was also dining and sitting room for its occupant; indeed, the large bay-window looking out upon his grove formed a room by itself, and in that his table was set. Out of this apartment a bedroom led on one side, a bathroom on the other.

The man's æsthetic taste was shown in the primitive yet decided character of his room and its furniture. Panels of dark gray cloth were set inside the heavy beams. A frieze, Egyptian in color and grouping, extended a foot below the ceiling. The cottage piano which had belonged to his mother, and on which he loved to improvise sweet, sad chords at twilight, stood in a recess on the right of the bay-window. Books of the choicest description both in contents and binding were ranged on several shelves of curly

pine, in front of which a dark red curtain hung from gilded rods. A guitar-case and music-stand stood in one corner near the piano; under it was a violin-box, which contained a rare old instrument purchased of a needy miner, and to which he could give not only voice but expression. If he had marked out for himself an isolated life, he had also surrounded that life with such accessories that much of its monotony might be cheered by congenial company and occupation.

For all these, he was a lonely and unhappy man. At times a cloud of impenetrable darkness seemed hanging over him, and he remained at home, utterly secluded. He was never known to sink the gentleman and man of culture in his enforced isolation. Like a king dethroned through malice or envy, he was still every inch a king. Always carefully and thoroughly attired when at home, when he went abroad for a solitary ride or walk his manner and dress were noticeably elegant.

Hermit George sat at his dinner, a frugal repast consisting more of fruits than meats. An out-of-door life had bronzed his complexion, and it was well; otherwise, as women sometimes say, he would have been too handsome for a man. As it was, the bold yet delicate features seemed fuller of decision, the large, soft, lambent eyes

less sensuous and passionate, notwithstanding the deep melancholy visible in his face, and that was always the first thing that strangers mentioned when speaking of him.

Whether he was a recluse by choice or nature, or his withdrawal consequent upon some disappointment of a personal character, was not known to the few who had once been in his society. All that was cognizant of him by outsiders was that he had purchased a grove of sour trees several years before, reduced their gnarled and crooked members to symmetry, budded them, and they were now in their third season of bearing.

From the railroad one could see the beautiful uniformity of his ten acres of orange-trees, but the house in the heart of the grove was not visible. His time was chiefly spent among his trees or in his garden, his only recreation riding round the county on Byrnie, his splendid mare, used specially for the saddle.

For work, he had two handsome mules, which sometimes, when he went long journeys in the winter into south Florida, where he was also a landholder, he put in his carriage, while Canty, who could ride as well as his master, rode Byrnie.

It was all the vacation he allowed himself, — going down into the tangled everglades of the

hummocks, where he superintended for a few months the acres in pineapples, mangoes, guavas, and oranges, which yielded him ample returns.

There, in a log-hut consisting of two rooms, the furniture of which he had made himself, with black Canty's help, he seemed to forget whatever of annoyance, privation, and disappointment had been his lot, to breathe freer and deeper, and to lose that anxious, troubled expression that hovered over his face like a spirit of unrest.

There were thick woods for the hunter and wide lakes for the angler; wild ravines and strange labyrinths to explore, haunts dear to the student and scientist; and he seldom lay down at night without adding to the rude cabinet in the corner of his room some curiosity of field or flood. This place was to him a refuge, — the element that constituted happiness as perfect as he dared to dream of; in fact, while here, it seemed to him that he lived.

Now he longed more than ever for the coming of midwinter, for then he might dare to think of that one perfect face he had seen for a few swift moments, — that one lovely presence that had bestowed upon him the only peace he had known for years.

Invisibly, though he scarce dared acknowledge it to himself, that presence sat with him, ate at

his table, viewed with him the beauties of Nature, was sad when he was sad, rejoiced when he rejoiced.

Every new pleasure he found in his rides and drives he seemed to feel that she shared with him, and he sometimes surprised himself asking the empty air a question, as if *she* stood before him.

At other times he was a prey to the most cruel imaginings. This pure face would never be nearer than in his dreams, this form never within his clasp. Only God and himself knew the reason why.

"But I placed the ring on her finger! Was it an omen? The pine woods seemed glorified that night; the cedar logs perfumed all the air; the moon shone on Paradise. And every time I think of her I see her standing there with downcast eyes, the long lashes touching her cheek, and myself steadying the little hand that trembled so, and putting on the ring! It seems incredible that I should have done so bold a thing; but I did. No one else will ever perform that office but the man she marries. The man she marries!" he repeated. "Well, so be it; I have had one supreme moment, — no future fate can take it from me."

So soliloquizing, after the meal was over he rang a little bell to summon Canty, who came

with a great show of caution, and the invariable speech, "I 's here, sah."

"All right," said his master, as he withdrew to the doorway, paper in hand, while Canty danced in and out with the dishes, now and then giving some little matter of news, or asking some question, quite oblivious as to whether he was answered or not.

"Dar 's a camp down to Darby Swamp," he said, going out on heel and toe with the remains of the fried chicken. "De Sperit 's gwine ter be dar, too," he added, sliding in with a great pan of dish-water, a towel dangling from one side and a dishcloth from the other. A deep silence followed. "De folks from de Fenn house — dey 's gwine ter be dar;" then he looked askance, as if asking pardon of the higher powers, executed a mental shuffle, and laughed silently but with great glee to himself, winking hard all the time.

Hermit George caught the words "Fenn house," and turned from his newspaper.

"What did you say, Canty? Who told you so?"

Canty flourished the dishcloth in silent ecstasy, and ground his right heel into the floor, shaking his toe.

"Dar man, Cole, he tole me," said the negro, opening his mouth to its widest extent and wag-

gling his jaw. "Dey 's all on fire ter see Hagar's chil'n in de camp;" and he shuffled to the window and back in as surreptitious a manner as was compatible with his surroundings, rubbing a spoon with his towel.

"When do you hold your camp-meeting?" asked his employer.

"Twenty-seven dis yer present month," said the negro, emphasizing each word with arms and shoulders.

"I don't believe Cole knew what he was talking about. White people never go to your camp-meetings."

"Esher, beggin' yo' parding, we never hes a 'stracted meetin' but white gemmen 'n' ladies comes ter see de convicts."

"What convicts?" asked Hermit George, starting and turning pale, and as he rose from his chair catching Canty at a series of pantomimic gestures with the towel and the salad-bowl.

"Dem wot 's ben conwicted — wot 's got on de ladder o' salversion 'n' is climbin' up de goldin sta'rs — dem wot."

"That will do, Canty; get out as soon as you can," said his master. "I want the room. I 'm going to write."

"I 's subsidin', sah;" and Canty cleared off the table and went quietly into the kitchen, where

he executed two or three pigeon-wings that would have done credit to a professional dancer; then ran against the low shelf over the chimney-place, and hiding his face in his arms laughed immoderately, looking up now and then to mutter as he hugged himself: —

"Jes speak o' dem are folkses! oh Lawd! Jes hint a' dem Ainsleys! oh Lawd! I thought how somefin would turn dat man o' stone inter soft flesh 'n' blood, 'n' now I know what 'll do it, — nothin' else but 'ligion or dat pretty Ainsley gal. He 's gwine ter go down to dat ar camp o' Hagar's chil'n, or I 'm a goin' ter stay home — 'n' I 's not gwine ter do dat. Laws, dar 's a deference already. S'pose he dono 't I 've ketched him nights gwine by de ole Fenn house, oh Lawd! S'pose he dono dis yer nig reckon what he stan' under de big oak-tree fer while Missy done sing in de chu'ch — 'n' he a holdin' his bref. 'Spec' he doant reckon dat Canty knows all de signs, ef he *ar* one o' Hagar's chil'n; 'n' now he 'll jes git and go to dat ar 'stracted camp-meetin', 'n' den we 'll see!"

After Canty had left him, Hermit George stood with folded arms, looking out upon a magnificent clump of bananas whose blossoms like blood-red chalices gave promise of choice fruit in the near future. The sadness in his eyes deepened; then, as he stood motionless, lost in thought, shadow

after shadow fled from his face, as one thin veil after another lifts from the brow of Nature at the coming of the sun, and presently he smiled.

The smile was not wholly genial, but it betokened softened thoughts and a possible ray of hope. Then his eye slowly travelled to a small escritoire, and all the brightness faded out.

"That alone," he said, "holds my secret, — the symbol of my shame and guilt. How dare I love that girl, who, if she knew — if she could see what I have, hidden there — would turn from me with horror and loathing! Great God! am I never to know peace? If not, better to dare my fate at once — better to cut loose from life and the destiny preparing for me — better to die — than be tracked — as I may be — seized — imprisoned — and — "

"'Et me in!" cried a small voice.

The man came out of his trance of terror, his face white, and written with lines of anguish.

Then he gave a gasp, — a little bitter laugh, — passed his hand over his beard, composed his countenance that he might betray no trace of the anguish that had convulsed his features, and opening the door, the golden curls and bright face of Wash Dunn appeared, the smartest, prettiest little cracker, with the drollest ways and

most unintelligible dialect of any native for miles around.

When his sister came for him and led him home, Hermit George stood in the doorway looking after them.

"Now, there 's a girl," he muttered, and smiled grimly, "who would make a man a tolerable wife, hoe his corn, after the cracker fashion, if he would let her, tend to his potato patch, bring the water, make beds, sweep the house, and cook — well, after a fashion. She would not need long wooing, either, poor little thing! pretty, after her kind; ambitious possibly, ignorant undeniably. I should be less than a man if I did not see what she thinks of me, poor child! How the red burns in her cheek! How her eye flashes and falls! But stop — I will not pursue the thought. Yet with such an one as she, what matter if a man has grave secrets? Even if the worst were known, what use would she make of the knowledge? But there are faces — and faces! God help me! can I ever forget that one, — the moonlight night, the soft glimmer of her garments, her fear, her trust? From her person emanated a charm so subtile that for a moment all heaven seemed about her. Her figure was perfection; her eyes, — I can never forget their velvety softness, — lips, throat, hair, figure! oh, she was all divine! But, fool that I am, why

do I dwell on such charms? They are not for me. The blessing of a pure and perfect love is not for such as I. Yet I cannot help thinking, dreaming of her. Oh, my God! if I could blot out the past ten years! if I were but innocent!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"I'LL GIT OUT A WARRANT!"

"ARE you sure it was gold, pa?"

So asked Miranda Beloit on her father's return from his purchase of the seed potatoes.

"Course I am. Willis 'lowed her money fer it, 'n' Brush said it was the cleanest, nicest stuff he'd seen fer a long time. I do wonder how they come by it? I wonder ef they've got eny more?"

"They might have found it somewhere about the Fenn house; I think I heard that Mr. Peter Fenn was an old Californian."

"Well, if he was, he would n't 'a' left any laying round loose, M'randy. Mebby the Ainsleys hev got some relations at the gold mines."

"Maybe; they ought to have, the way that Stella dresses! I never saw such extravagance for poor folks."

"She kep' over some of her ball clothes, I s'pose, gal-fashion. Vanity is the last thing you can dreen out on a woman's nater," he added dryly.

"Well, all I can say is, *I* can't wear such clothes. I 've heard all sorts of stories about the Ainsleys; I s'pose they think folks won't hear about it in Florida; but it 's just where we do hear everything. Did you send for the potatoes?"

"Yes, 'n' I 'm kinder sorry I did. Twenty-four dollars gone. I never did such an extravagant thing in my life, 'cept when I got that carpet for the parlor. You might 'a' bought lots o' dresses with that money, Randy."

"Yes; only I should n't have got the dresses, and I have got the carpet."

"Don't you count the chickens afore they 're hatched, M'randy. I ain't dead yet."

"Well, I hope I don't expect to be left without a roof to cover my head," she said sharply.

"Not quite so bad as that — not quite so bad," laughed the old man, happy when he succeeded in making some one uncomfortable; and they had wrangled over that bright red and yellow Brussels carpet a great many times.

Miranda was ill at ease. She had been the leader of the youthful society of Wild Rose, and head singer in the choir of the new church. This recent comer had usurped her place in the choir, and was actually paid for singing. The Squire's reputed wealth and his daughter's skill in providing impromptu entertainments had heretofore made Beloit's house the fashion in that

part of Florida. Now the visits of the planters' sons were few and far between. Not that in ceasing to visit the Beloits they had transferred their attentions to the Fenn house. Stella was much too busy to allow that, and the young men had been given to understand that the Ainsleys had no servants, and consequently could not entertain company. They called sometimes of evenings, however, to see Russel, frequently to take him with them to some woodland or lake gathering; and now and then Stella joined the party.

The lakes in the vicinity of Wild Rose were marvels of beauty. All that an artist could desire of wild and romantic scenery they possessed. Magnificent water-oaks branched out for a hundred feet and up for a hundred more. From these gigantic limbs hung the rich festoons of gray and purple moss. These places did not lack natural curiosities, — sinks a hundred feet deep in which grew immense trees, whose tops reached only to the surface of the ground; natural wells, whose smooth sides need not have shamed the most careful workman; awful chasms, caves, curious vegetation, — all which impressed Stella with the fact that Florida was a land of wonders. She always came from such excursions with an unspoken wish that some one, whose name never passed her lips, had been of the company.

One day Stella was called to the door by a loud, impatient knock. It was perhaps a week after the sale of the gold. Russel had gone hunting with young Chestnut and taken Tom along. They had promised to bring back plenty of game. As Stella opened the door she drew back, startled. The Squire stood there in his crumpled hat with the crape band, his eyes staring wrathfully from behind the big blue spectacles. Outside, the gray horse pawed the ground, seeming animated with the same spirit that possessed his master.

"Mornin', Miss," said the Squire.

"Good-morning, sir," said Stella, quietly. "Won't you come in?"

"No, thanks. Didn't your folks draw some things from the station last night?"

"Yes, sir. Goods — groceries that came from New York."

"New York — h'm; that's whar the p'taters come from. Wonder if they saw a couple o' bags there — for me."

"I think Cole did say something about some bags being there," said Stella.

"H'm!" sniffed the Squire; "how'd he know they were p'taters? I'm feared he drawed 'em here by mistake; they're clean gone, 'n' they cost me twenty-four good dollars."

"I'm sure they did n't bring any potatoes

here," said Stella; "we have more than we need."

"Them p'taters was down to the station last night," said the Squire, with emphasis. "I told Job, my hired man, to draw 'em then, but the feller got drunk. I went down this mornin' to see 'bout 'em, and them p'taters was gone. Your folks made a mistake afore — might do it agin, 'n' I 'm twenty-four dollars out."

"I assure you we have not got your potatoes," said Stella, distressed at his manner.

"What is the matter, daughter? who is troubling you?" and Mr. Ainsley came out from the room beyond.

"He thinks Russel hauled his potatoes here," said Stella.

"Look here, my man, we know what was hauled here; you had better leave."

"Do you know who I am?" asked the Squire, pompously.

"I hope you are a gentleman; if so, you will leave the premises," said Mr. Ainsley.

"'N' I 'm sure you 've got my seed p'taters," said the Squire, wrathfully. "Cost me twenty-four dollars."

"I have nothing more to say," said Mr. Ainsley, trying to shut the door.

"I'll git out a warrant! I 'm bound to have

my p'taters." He was talking to the door, which had been closed in his face.

Presently the big gray horse was dashing over the road.

"Do you suppose he would dare come here with a warrant?" asked Stella. "Will he search the house?"

"He may if he can," said her father. "A man's house is his castle. The cold-blooded hound, to accuse us of theft!"

Stella had never seen her father so much excited; she watched and waited, dreading yet expecting the promised visit.

It was four o'clock when the wagon came rattling along again. The gray horse stopped at the gate. A strange gentleman sat beside the Squire, the latter armed with an official-looking document.

What was to be done? Her father had gone upstairs for his daily siesta. If only she could prevent their meeting!

Presently the Squire mounted the steps. Stella nerved herself to the task and opened the door.

"You have come with a search-warrant, I suppose," she said. "You may go through the lower part of the house, but you must not go upstairs."

"I 'may,' and 'must not,' eh?" echoed the Squire. "I'll let you know that the law — the

law!" he added, shaking the paper he held — "is on my side. Let any one hender me at their peril!"

"Stand aside, daughter."

She felt herself lifted and placed in the room beyond. What would her father do? He was very angry, she knew, by the pallor of his face and the way he held in his voice.

In another moment the old squire was dashing down the road.

Tom came in with a red face, and sat down, laughing.

"If you had only seen it, Stell! Papa lifted him almost out of his boots. The way he put! why, the poor little fellow was frightened nearly to death. Imagine him dangling, hat, spectacles, and all! Then his hat fell off, and he was going on without it, but thought better of it. It was the funniest sight I ever saw; I did n't know papa was so strong. What a splendid hit he could make from the shoulder!"

Squire Beloit drove straight to the station, turning his head uneasily in the tall collar, which now looked limp and rumpled, as if it still felt the strong grip that for a moment had fastened on his neck, lifting him bodily. He had been very glad to shake himself off and leave the premises untouched, though trembling with rage and muttering vengeance.

He stopped at the store. Mr. Willis had just gone behind the counter.

"Did you see them p'taters?" asked the Squire, wildly excited.

"What potatoes?"

"Them I sent fer — prize seed — cost twenty-four dollars, hard cash."

"No; but I've got some of the best potatoes you ever saw."

"Where'd you git 'em?"

"Bought 'em this morning of the Ainsleys. Never knew the Fenn ground was capable of producing such potatoes."

"Thought so!" said the Squire, triumphantly. "Them's the bags, there, — them two bags! them's my p'taters!"

"Well, I should say not. I rather think they're mine."

"Paid for 'em?" asked the Squire.

"Not yet."

"Then I'll take 'em! Got the law fer it — see?" He flourished his warrant. "I knew them Ainsleys took my p'taters; they was seen on the platform — come in yisterdy; this mornin' my bags are gone — cost me twenty-four dollars! Them's the bags — my bags! I know 'em. Here, you darky!" — and he hailed a negro, — "haul them bags to my wagon, 'n' I'll give you a quarter."

"Look here, Squire, are you mad?" asked the grocer, bewildered at the accusation, the Squire's audacity, and the warrant. "Don't be a fool. Let those bags alone."

"I've got the law and the constable!" shouted the Squire. "Stop me at your peril! Joe, take them bags out; they're mine."

"Well, if that is n't the most high-handed piece of business that ever I saw!" said the astonished grocer, as the Squire drove triumphantly off with his booty. "Branding a family like the Ainsleys as thieves! He ought to be run out of the place."

The news spread like wildfire. All sorts of stories were afloat. The Ainsleys had robbed the Squire, the Squire had robbed the Ainsleys.

Russel was furious. He was for dire vengeance at once.

"Why, don't you see how it stands?" asked Stella, laughing in spite of her vexation. "The Squire has stolen *our* potatoes! It will all come out by and by."

"I'll go to law!" said Russel, hotly.

"We have n't money enough to go to law; besides, it is too comical. The jury could n't give a verdict for laughing. Don't you see? we know that we have n't stolen the Squire's potatoes, and we're *sure* that he has stolen ours."

But though she laughed, the girl had a heavy heart.

If one would appreciate the truth of a homely proverb, "Tit for tat is the usual policy among neighbors," or feel the cumulative force of a bit of scandal, or any unusual news, let him live in a hamlet of from ten to twenty families; and if he does not embrace the first opportunity to move into less curious if more crowded localities, it is only because his means will not enable him to make the change.

Tom came home one night "weltering in his gore," as he afterward described it. At all events, he was very much battered and bruised.

Stella cried over him, but he called her a baby.

"Don't you be worried about *me!* it 'll all wash off. You see, there 's only one ugly cut; but I laid two of 'em out straight for calling me thief."

"Oh, Tom! they did not call you a thief!"

"Well, pretty much the same thing; they hinted!" blurted Tom. "But they 'll never do it again."

"Tom! you did n't kill them?"

"Not if dead folks run pretty lively. I almost wish I had. You think I 'm a sight; I wonder what you would have thought of them? They won't say 'thief' or 'potatoes' again in a hurry, you bet."

"Don't talk slang, Tom!"

"Slang! I 'll slang 'em," cried Tom, ludicrous in his wrath, inasmuch as he was covered with

blood and sand. "Why, I could lick the whole boodle in ten minutes."

"Do be a gentleman, Tom!"

"Well, wait till I 'm washed," was the characteristic reply.

That same afternoon Stella was waiting for the arrival of the mail-train; when it stopped, she heard her name called in unmistakable accents of delight.

There, in all the glory of a real Parisian outfit, — suit, bonnet, gloves, boots, — stood Kate Ainsley, the only girl-cousin Stella had in the world.

"You darling!" was the first exclamation, as the girls embraced. "Don't look so wild; I would n't write; what was the use? I knew you 'd say there was n't any spare bedroom, or the house was poky, or something; so I started off, determined for once in my life to make a sensation. The truth is, I was sick for a sight of you. Coming home from abroad and finding one's friends and relations all gone to Florida! The idea was by no means delightful, I can tell you. As if I could live without a daily sight of you and Aunt Stella!"

A long, heavy box stood farther down by the side of the track. Stella had noticed it, and said to herself, "A piano for somebody." It had come by the noon freight.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I'M A GEORGIAN!"

"I'VE oceans to tell you, and I'm awfully hungry; do take me home," Kate was saying, as handsome Will Chestnut drove up with his best team; "and — Stella — why — that must be your piano! Yes, it is!"

"My piano!" and Stella stood bewildered. The glad news was almost too good to be true.

"Your piano, my sweet coz! Kiss me for bringing it; though I didn't exactly bring it, as it seems it preceded me. I hoped it would. You look at me exactly as if I were something unreal; pinch me, and see if I am veritable flesh and blood."

"My piano!" gasped Stella. "Oh, Kate, then uncle could n't sell it!"

"Don't be so mercenary," rattled Kate. "I thought you lost all that calculating spirit in Florida, and just revelled in fruits and flowers and oranges and log-houses. Is yours a log-house? I'm absolutely wild to see one. Yes, dear, that's your piano," she said, after a little pause, seeing that Stella's eyes were bright with

tears. "Papa would n't sell it; he had a chance — and oh, it was so fortunate that he had n't concluded the bargain! A gentleman offered six hundred dollars for it. You know Mr. Betts, who lives on Fifth Avenue; well, it was he — wanted it for Jenny Betts, little conceited thing! I'm so glad she did n't get it! Papa had fixed upon eight hundred; but just before he decided to take six — Please do let us get home, Stella, before I tell you the rest of the news; it 's royal! How the people stare! It must be at my imported dress. And who is that very nice-looking young gentleman?"

Young Chestnut, who had been lingering near, came up, and Stella introduced her cousin, still so much in a rapture of surprise as to be somewhat incoherent in her language.

"May I drive you home? There 's room for two," the young man asked.

"Well, youngster," said a voice they recognized, and Cracker Joe came out of the station. "I were goin' to ask that same question myself. Howdy, ladies?" He took off his wide-brimmed sombrero as Stella introduced him. "However, can't I be of some service? Let me haul the trunk."

Stella gladly assented, and the tall Saratoga was placed in his wagon. "Mrs. Carew is still a stranger," said Stella, smiling:

"That's a fact, Miss Ainsley, — not because of her will, though. The children have been a bit under the weather, 'n' she's as nesty as a settin' hen when they're sick; can't coax her outside the door, scarsly — but she 's comin';" and the wagon drove on.

"What a singular-looking man!" said Kate. "Why doesn't he cut his hair like a Christian? Rather handsome, though, on second thought. Who is he?"

"They call him 'Cracker Joe,'" said Will Chestnut.

"Then he is a specimen of the real thing, — a *bona fide* Florida cracker," said Kate. "I never saw one before."

"He's a legitimate cracker," said Will Chestnut, "and a tremendous fellow; carries the largest plantation this side of Jacksonville, and works more hands than any man I ever knew. You ought to visit his place; it's a regular show. The people of this county swear by Cracker Joe. His influence over the negroes is simply immense, and yet he's none too kind to them; he just knows the secret of managing them. It would n't surprise me if he was put up for Congress some day. He is a very intelligent man, though to hear his vernacular you might not think so; still — he's a cracker."

"What are you?" asked Kate.

"I'm a Georgian!" was the proud response.

Presently they stopped at the Fenn house, which, though they had christened it "Oak View," still held its old name in the community.

"Seen the Squire lately?" asked Cracker Joe, as, after the ladies had disappeared inside the house, Mr. Ainsley came out with Russel. "There 's goin' to be a little fun 'bout thet p'tato business," he added, "and we intend to run him right straight out of town. Don't want him, nohow; he 's a nuisance. Why, see here; the man has stolen your potatoes! Bless me! in some parts of this county the young cracker bloods would have given him his desert with short shrift a few years ago. 'T is n't now as it used to be, when a lot of jolly fellows met at old Dyke's tavern, county cross-roads, and what between cards, whiskey, and smoking, got roaring tipsy before midnight. They 'd hev planned for the Squire's downfall in one o' them bouts. Why, I 've been thar when words got high about some trifle, and 't was as much as your life was worth to stand up straight. I 'll tell you why: as soon as a row began, they put out the lights and fought in the dark; and they always singled out their man. I've known two fellows shot in such a *mêlée*. Great cartridges! a fellow had to take his chances, or get down on his knees and crawl out of it. Upon my word, I 've counted

ten or twelve pistol-shots in one such bout; fellows fired anywhere — into the ceiling rather than not hev a shot. Times are different now, I 'm glad to say; " and touching his hat, away he rode, his red curls fluttering in the breeze.

Kate was disappointed in finding an ordinary habitation, ceiled and roofed, instead of a log-cabin, and volubly expressed her disappointment. It was too comfortable by half, she said.

A merry company gathered round the tea-table that night; Kate, as usual, witty, bright, and social, and taking the lead in conversation.

" I 'm astonished, Uncle Russel, to see you absolutely ruddy. I expected to meet a languid and interesting invalid; and here you are actually stout! And now you must hear the best news of all: those bonds considered by you good for nothing, and that you gave papa to keep for you, have sold very well. Of course they have n't turned out a fortune; but I think you will realize six or seven thousand dollars."

" That 's a fortune in this country," said Russel.

" At any rate, it came just in time to save the piano; and when father told me he should send that, I told him he must send me too; and though he protested, he gave in quite gracefully at the last, and actually said I might stay till he came after me. So here I am."

"You don't say Stella's piano has come!" said Mrs. Ainsley, her gentle eyes moist. "I have been longing to hear Stella play."

"I 'll play so much now that you 'll be longing to have me stop," laughed Stella.

When the girls were together in Stella's room, and the first confidences had been shared between them, Stella told the story of the Squire and his potatoes, at which Kate laughed heartily.

"Well, and what are you doing?" she asked. "What beaus have you captured? Are there many young gentlemen in Wild Rose? How do you contrive to pass your time in this wilderness? No theatres, no concerts, no lectures. There 's a church, for you sing, there; it follows as a matter of course that the singing is good. I rather like your friend Mr. Chestnut. Is he a conquest? No? He would look well in stage costume. I 've been practising for private theatricals; we had them among ourselves in Paris, — such nice times! London is better, though. I saw the prince and princess, was introduced at court, recited at one or two gatherings of the nobility, and if I could only get somebody to write me up for a year or two I believe I 'd turn actress and astonish the world. I had such pretty things said to me! if they could only be printed! Can't we get up something lively here? Who are your gentleman visitors?"

Stella ran over the names of their friends and neighbors, mentioning all but that of Hermit George. For some reason she could not bring herself to speak of him.

There was a nook where the singing piano could stand. It came next day, and bright, vivacious Kate enjoyed the pleasure it gave to the whole family. She was very unlike her cousin in appearance, being dark, with large, expressive black eyes, and capable at times of looking quite as beautiful in her way.

Will Chestnut had driven home in a brown-study. "Of all the girls I have ever met," he said in a soliloquy, "that is the one I should like to see the mistress of the Myrtles!"

As a new-comer, Kate received the usual modicum of calls from the sons and daughters of the resident families, — all but Miss Beloit, who stayed at home in solitary grandeur. *She* have anything to do with such people — not she!

Meantime the Squire was losing flesh. Looked at as an after consideration, he felt that his conduct had not been that of a gentleman.

One day a letter came directed to him in a large, bold hand. He opened it, turned it over, glanced at Miranda, and finally read it. Then his chin fell, his breath came short, his eyes were glued to the contents of this to him extraordinary missive.

"Well, pa, if you have read it upside-down and wrong-side-out, and scrutinized every letter there is in it, perhaps you 'll tell me who it 's from," said Miranda, in a voice sharpened by vexation. She had been watching the Squire's queer antics out of the corners of her eyes.

The Squire started.

"Well, M'randy, I don't think I ever felt so sure that I was a dratted old fool before;" was his answer. He looked as if ready to tear his hair, or pluck out his beard, or do some other desperate thing.

"Why, what has happened? Insurance run out?"

"There you go, always thinking of property. Read that!"

She took the letter and read as follows: —

SQUIRE BELOIT: SIR, — I heard a queer story about some potatoes of yours that were missing, — seed potatoes, — and I had noticed two big bags in our station that nobody seemed to claim.

On inquiry, I find that the freight-agent of B. & B., having received orders to bring some freight from Wild Rose station, came by the other night, — freight-train being delayed, — and seeing these bags thought they were destined for this place.

You know how careless they are on this road. I sometimes feel as if every man Jack of them ought to be turned off and responsible people put in their places.

I have taken pains to label the two bags, which I find contain very large potatoes, and send them by to-day's freight. Hope they may reach you in good condition.

ALEXANDER FRY.

"For Heaven's sake, pa!" gasped Miranda.

"Nice little scrape I've got myself into, hev n't I?"

"Pa!" screamed Miranda, as she rose from her chair, "instead of they stealing our potatoes, *you stole theirs!* Everybody will know it. We shall be the laughing-stock of the place. Oh, pa! how could you? I shall die of mortification."

"It's a bad scrape — ther 's no two ways about it, M'randy," said the Squire, while his daughter grew every moment more hysterical. "But who 'd 'a' thought it? I was jest as *sure* them was my p'taters as if I 'd seen 'em carry 'em off with my own eyes."

"What shall we do? We're ruined!" gurgled Miranda, with a fresh burst of sobs. "I never want to look in anybody's face again. We shall be the laughing-stock of the town. You might 'a' waited a few days; you 've got such a hot temper!"

"Now, go on, M'randy, go right on. Ef it had n't 'a' ben fer you, with your jealous disposition, forever settin' me agin 'em, I would n't 'a'

done it. But ther 's no help now," he added doggedly. "We must git out on it the best we can."

"I think it 's a–awful!" sobbed Miranda, working herself into a passion. "You 've disgraced yourself, 'n' you 've disgraced me."

"And you driv me to it, with your mean spite! You need n't look so; you did! The fellers stopped comin' here, 'n' you blamed that girl, 'n' set me agin her; you know you did."

"*We* steal their p'taters!" cried Miranda, with a final shriek; and presently the cook had her under discipline for a fit of hysterics.

A more woebegone, crestfallen man, the very hat on his head and the very crape on his hat testifying to his utter humility, never stood on another man's doorstep, than Squire Beloit, that afternoon.

Tom came to the door.

"Is your pa home?" asked the Squire, with unwonted solemnity.

"Well, yes, he is," Tom admitted reluctantly.

"Can I see him?"

Tom paused a minute.

"I don't know," he said; "I 'll go ask him." His native politeness triumphed, however. "You might as well walk in," he said, leading the way.

In went the Squire. The sun lay broadly over the rich brown rafters of the keeping-room, — the

brightest place, the poor old man thought, that he had ever looked upon. Pictures, wild flowers, dried leaves and grasses, pretty rugs, old-fashioned chairs, brass fender and andirons; the beautiful piano open, and one of Schubert's melodies standing on the rack; everywhere books in bright bindings, pictures, easels, racks, and tidies.

He realized that his splendid parlor, with the plastered walls, and real Brussels carpet that Miranda would scarcely let the sun peep at, did not begin to look so mellow, rich, and even stylish, as this home-like living-room of the old Fenn house.

Presently Mr. Ainsley appeared, but stopped short on the threshold.

The Squire looked ten years older. His head was bowed, his knees knocked together.

"Mr. Ainsley," he said, with the weak, broken tones of a child, "I 've found them p'taters."

"What!" and the tall figure entered.

"I found them missin' p'taters, 'n' I 've come to make restitootion."

"I don't know about that, after subjecting us to the suspicions of the whole neighborhood."

"Don't say no more," groaned the Squire. "*I'm* the thief; I stole them p'taters, though I did think —"

And here the poor old man broke down. It was a pitiful sight.

Suffice it to say that the matter was all arranged, and the old Squire left the premises impressed in favor of the entire family.

Miranda was sufficiently punished, and began to study how she might regain the esteem she had lost, by an almost painful deference toward Stella. But it would not do.

"Who stole the Squire's p'taters?" became a byword in Wild Rose; and before the winter deepened the Squire sold all his possessions and emigrated farther south, where probably the same old story followed them.

CHAPTER XV.

"WHEN 'D YOU FUST SEE DAD?"

WHEN an unexpected phase of character appears in one with whom we have been intimate for a lifetime, the mind for some time refuses to believe that what it has seen can be credible.

On the day following that of Derintha's strange experience with her father, the girl went about the house like one in a dream.

"You 'm moonstruck, child?" her mother said, as she watched her languid movements. "I never acted so, 'cept when I fust saw you 'm dad. There 's no un for you t' be in love with, 'cept it mout be Hermit George; 'n' that — thee 'd better be dead," she added angrily.

Derintha laughed faintly; the swift color mantled her cheeks, then faded to as swift a pallor.

"Where 'd you fust see dad?" she asked with another sudden accession of color. "He 's none so handsome; how 'd 'e fall in love with him?"

"Wal, I dono, he wor putty good-lookin' led, he wor; better nor most o' the young leds round in them parts."

"But you wor handsome then, mother. I wonder at you 'm choosin' him. You should 'a' thought of us, 'n' got one richer. We be way-down uns, 'n' likely to stay there."

"Well, I dono," said her mother, smiling at the remembrance of her once fair face, and pleased at her daughter's allusion to it. "May time come when Jim mout holp hisself better 'n now. Corn crap ain't bad, 'n' he have high hope o' the sugar this 'n year. On'y las' night he 'n said it mout be as how he could 'ford to let you take pianny lessons o' them folks down to old Fenn house."

"O–h!"

The girl stood still in the middle of the room, leaning on the uncouth broom-handle, to which the son of the soil adjusts a few shucks of corn, making an unwieldy instrument of torture for his women-folk. Her color went and came. Her big, bright eyes moistened.

"Did dad say that? 'n' on'y las' night—" She shuddered, turned away, and began sweeping the floor with unconscious energy.

"Well, tell the holt of it," said her mother, who was watching her, a keen interest in her faded blue eyes.

"He wor cross," snapped Derintha. "*I* say the boys oughten draw the water, with that heavy chain. But then, he had been taking out o' the whiskey bottle, I reckon."

"Oh, well, he 's powerful weak, yer dad is, D'rinthy, 'n' so 'm I, — jes powerful weak. We must put a dash o' whiskey in when the water stands down in the four-acre lot. Ef pore Mandy 'd 'a' taken a deal of it she never would 'a' got so low down. But yer dad 'n' I, we 'low we love our chil'n, — I s'pose you won't go fer to deny that, — 'n' it 's on'y the poverty 's kep' us from schulin 'em good. Now that Miss Ainsley at the old Fenn 's going fer to teach the pianny, we 'll let you take ef we can. The rest must git along best they know how; fer as to shoes fer ten, that 's outen the question."

"An' he 'd let me learn to play?"

Derry paused and looked contemplatively round as she added, "But where 'd we set a piano, here?"

"Wait till we git one fust, chile, 'n' don' go to countin' yer chickens 'fore they 're hatched; might be they 'd all die inside. Ef your dad's sugar 'n' cotton turns out well, we 'll let you take lessons, not to say nuthin 'bout your gittin a pianny, — though Miss Luce did say, onct, you might hev her old un to practise on; she keeps it now fer milk-pans 'n' sich, but it ain't a bad un, she says."

"Oh, mother," cried Derry, joyfully, "how good of her! and as to dad, he 's not so bad as I thought he was."

"You 'n no right to think anything hard o' he," said her mother, with unwonted severity. "Happen he 'd make money, he 'n do his best fer ye all, though through fever 'n' agur, 'n' dumb chills ailin' of him in this down country, he 'n powerful weak."

Derry finished her work, and donning her best gown and shoes, — she never wore the too yellow chain she had bought, when she went to Lucy Cottage, — she took her way over to Mrs. Carew's, to tell her friend all about it.

She found the neat two-wheeler drawn up to the door, with Victory, the best horse in Cracker Joe's stables, standing uneasily, his head held by a grinning yellow boy all teeth and eyes.

Before the mirror in her own bedroom stood Mrs. Joe just drawing together the strings of a dainty little new bonnet, preparatory to tying them in a large bow, which was then the fashion. So trim and pretty and stylish she looked, that Derry drew a huge sigh, which sounded on the little woman's ear.

She turned round in her quick fashion.

"Why, Derry, child! I did n't know you were here," she said, a pipe of welcome in her sweet tones. "I 'm so sorry I 'm going out."

"It don't matter," said the girl, admiring, with big, shining eyes, the pretty outfit which little Mrs. Joe wore for the first time.

"Do you like my dress? I let Joe buy it for me, for an experiment, and it happened to be just what I wanted. You have a new dress on too; it's very neat and pretty."

Derry looked down on her cheap cashmere, decidedly dissatisfied with her own appearance.

"I'm going to visit the Ainsleys, and you can't think how I dread it!" said Mrs. Joe, scanning her own bright face complacently. "If I only had some one to go with me. I dread going alone — Why," as an idea struck her, "you might go!"

"Me! my gracious!" and Derry's eyes grew wider. "How can I? I'd give anything to go, but you see I'm not fixed nice enough."

"A ribbon or two," murmured Mrs. Joe meditatively, opening and shutting the drawers. "There's that little hat of mine in pink, with the old-gold feathers. It's not out of style yet, and very little worn. Who'd know? Why, yes, just let me fix you up a bit. It's nice I thought of it. I want company, and you'd like to go, would n't you?"

"Indeed, indeed I should," said Derry, earnestly. It was very seldom she had the opportunity to take a drive with the rich cracker's wife.

"Then go you shall, my dear."

"Oh, my!" and that being the extent of Derry's

fervent approval of the expedient, Mrs. Joe brought out hat, ribbons, gloves, and such a wealth of little adjuncts that the girl hardly knew which to choose amid this unwonted array of magnificence.

"You look as pretty as a picture; see what fine feathers will do!" and Mrs. Joe, after due superintendence, turned Derry to the glass.

"Indeed, I'd hardly know 't was me," said Derry, gazing with wonder and a little awe at her reflection in the large mirror. Her cheeks bore the faint color of the blush rose, her eyes sparkled, and the brown hair curled in little rings under the stylish hat that quite transformed her.

"Shall we drive round to your mother and tell her where you are going?" asked Mrs. Joe.

"No need," said Derry, struggling between the wish to show herself off arrayed in purple and fine linen, seated in a real carriage, and the dread of meeting the rush of ragged, jeering juveniles, and the tawny, scrawny face and figure of Mrs. Dunn, or the listless, slovenly presence of dad; "mother won't care, so long as I am with you, where I go."

"All right," said Mrs. Carew, as they both sprang into the wagon. "Give Vic her head, boy. Don't mind her fidgets. She 's the safest horse in the stable, but she loves to show off when she starts," said Mrs. Joe, as Derry caught

nervous hold of the seat; and Victory, after a few graceful curvetings, subsided into an easy trot that she kept up all the way.

Turning into one of the narrow roads between two cornfields, they were met by a horseman who gallantly uncovered his head — a glorious head it was — and bowed nearly to the saddle.

Derry's cheeks were ablaze, so were her eyes; all her pulses beat as one, and a new enthusiasm animated her manner. *He* had seen her in all the glory of her fine habiliments, dressed like a lady, seated beside the wealthiest woman in the county, albeit she was the wife of a cracker born.

"I think that man has the handsomest face I ever saw in my life," said Mrs. Joe, skilfully avoiding a stump by the roadside so near her carriage that the wheel grazed it. "I should like to know his history. Joe does n't like him, never did. I suppose men come to hear of each other's failings. One would n't think he had ever done harm, though. There certainly is a mystery about him; he has scarcely been out of Florida for years, and he has no acquaintances, to say nothing of friends. Well, I suppose he is dangerous in some way," she added, laughing. "Young and handsome and not married, — never seen at church or gathering, wedding or funeral; I declare, I should like to know his history."

Derry listened, confused, charmed, and elated all at once. She felt a childish joy in her changed attire, though she knew it was borrowed plumage.

A dreamer, and by nature romantic, it seemed to her that he must have discovered the possibilities of her beauty, and noticed the pretty belongings of her attire, — the ribbons at her throat, her long silken gloves, her laces, her very hat-strings; and she sat there plunged in her own reflections, scarcely conscious of what Mrs. Joe was saying, only building a new castle, of which he was the occupant and she his companion. And what if his past would not bear the scrutiny of strictly correct people? If he had been a good man for seven years, that was enough for her.

"There's the old Fenn house," said Mrs. Joe; "how natural it looks! only everything is in good order, — a new gate, new fences; and what a pretty garden they are going to have!"

Derry had grown pale and nervous; her teeth were almost chattering. To her the Ainsleys were like the inhabitants of another world than her own, as indeed they were.

"They won't come and see you because you call, will they? Oh, I should die!" she said, all in one breath.

"Why, child, what do you mean?" asked Mrs. Joe; and then she comprehended. "Oh, no, there's no obligation. If they should call on me

I can send for you; of course they know we are different,— crackers, as you might say;" and she laughed. "We are old Floridians, you know, and don't live by rule as they do, though we follow the fashions, just like city people, if we can; I dare say it will all be right enough."

Derry broached the matter of which her mother had spoken, as they neared the house.

"It may n't come to nothin'," she said; "cotton may rust, 'n' corn be cheap. But I 'd be in heaven, I think, if I could learn to play; 'n' if things go right, dad he says I may."

"Why, won't it be charming?" said Mrs. Joe; "and you have such an ear for music! I wish you lived with me; I should like to see how you would come out."

"I know what you think," said Derry, in a low voice. "We 're low down, anyhow, and we shall always be low down, I s'pose; but then, some people come up. Look at Mr. Willis. His dad was a low-down cracker, 'n' there never was a nicer gentleman. And Mr. Oulden, he 's a lawyer, and goes in the best society; but then, they went to schools and colleges. And then there are rich crackers like your husband, you know, as good as the best."

"If folks 'll only take their chances," said Mrs. Joe; "everybody has one chance in a lifetime, Joe says."

"I wonder when my chance 'll come?" thought Derry, with a heightened color.

They were by this time at the door of the Fenn house, and Cole was coming round to hold the horse. Mr. Ainsley also made his appearance, and helped out Mrs. Joe and Derry, who stood blushing and nervous, looking at her companion to get her cue, and following her into the pretty, sunny living-room, where sat Stella and her mother, looking so cool and regal and handsome that Derry wanted to turn and run.

Fortunately for her good manners Mrs. Joe, with ready tact, covered her confusion, and before she knew it she was comfortably seated beside a low table, and Mrs. Ainsley was showing her the pictures in a small portfolio, so that she had little to do but to sit and admire, and say "yes" and "no," which luckily she remembered to do, instead of the daily "ye 'um" and "no 'um" which she heard at home.

They had been there some moments, when with a clatter that was inexcusably noisy in came Mrs. Beck and her daughter. Norman Knowlton followed in their wake like an intelligent dog who has learned to know his place.

The woman's talk was largely of fences and horses, drainage, the trespassing of cattle, and the number of acres she had put in corn, during which she fanned herself vigorously, having pre-

viously untied her bonnet-strings, quite unconscious of a serious fracture in her dress which was disclosed with each movement of the arm.

Fanny delivered herself of opinions with a patronizing air that made her fourteen years seem a fiction. Nothing escaped her, — fashion, agriculture, religion, amusements; and she had a keen retort or laughing repartee for them all, while the young man came in now and then with assertion or suggestion, and seemed to be continuously engaged with flicking dust or sand from his faultless costume or his shining boots.

"Particularly nasty, this sand," he said to Tom, who had been making flies for fishing.

"I thought it was particularly clean," said Tom. "New York mud is nasty, though."

"Yes, but you can take the cars."

"Bother the cars! I never rode — not even in our own carriage, when we kept one. I prefer the mud," said Tom. "Do you fish?"

"Too hard work for me," was the response.

"I suppose you hunt sometimes?"

"Don't care for hunting," was the answer.

"What do you do?" asked blunt Tom.

"Put in for sleep as often as I can. One can't do much here but eat and sleep," he said lazily.

"What sort of a fellow are you, anyway?" asked Tom; but the question only elicited a laugh.

"Well, we got through," said Mrs. Carew, when the horse's head was turned homeward, "and, oh, what charming people!"

Derry drew a long breath of relief. Needless to say, between her terror of saying something that might betray her ignorance, and her fear that they might find out who she was, she had not much enjoyed the call.

Nevertheless it had been good for her, lifted her for a brief hour above the commonplaces of life.

The sweet serenity and lovely, high-bred face of Stella Ainsley, the quiet, refined, low-voiced mother, who seemed so solicitous to afford her pleasant entertainment, and who must have noticed the strain she was putting on herself, the elegant manners of the master of the house, contrasting so strongly with what she saw daily in her own family, fired her with a determination to improve herself, her home, and, if possible, her surroundings.

"What do you think of Miss Stella Ainsley?" asked Mrs. Joe, holding in the mettlesome horse, who was contemplating a run all the way home.

"I think she is lovely," said Derry, with honest enthusiasm. "I s'pose she is what you would call a real beauty."

"Yes, she is very handsome; but what I like about her is the sweetness of her manner. There was nothing fussy, or what Joe would call 'stuck

up,' about her. No wonder he praised her. I have never heard him talk so much about a stranger. If it had n't been for that dreadful Mrs. Beck, I should have had a delightful call. What a woman that is!"

"And that Fanny! To hear her, to look at her, and then look at Miss Ainsley!"

"Pert little cat!" said Mrs. Joe, with a vicious accent foreign to her usual tone. "Did you hear her ask me how old I was when I was married?"

"What did you tell her?"

"'Just exactly eleven years younger than I am now,' I said; I hope she was satisfied. But I never was a fly-away; I had too much hard work to do. By the way, the Ainsleys are all going to the darky camp next Sunday."

"They!" exclaimed Derry, with a sort of horror; "*they* go to nigger meetings? Why, that 's way low down. I don't believe I 'd go myself."

"They want to study the natives," said Mrs. Joe, laughing; "or rather Mr. Ainsley does. He is writing for some of the New York papers, and I suppose all these out-of-the-way things make his stock in trade. Perhaps you won't thank me, but I told them I would go and take you."

"Dad would n't hear of it, s'pose he would?" Derry asked, looking up, struck with a sudden desire to go.

"Well, I'll call for you, and you can go or not. I don't think your father would mind. I am quite anxious to go, for Pruny is to be one of the attractions. I should like to hear Pruny preach. I can hear her sing any time, but I never heard her preach. They say she has a gift."

"I should like to hear her," said Derry.

"I tell you what, Derry! if you don't mind it, I'll make you a present of the little things you 've got on. You 'll take them from an old friend, won't you? And there 's lots more, — ribbons a little soiled, that could be brightened up, and laces that I never think of using. There they lie, doing nobody any kind of good. There 's all colors, and you or your sisters might like them."

Derry's eyes sparkled her thanks.

"Oh, Miss Luce, you 're a great deal too kind! It 's so slow picking berries, and then get so little for 'em; indeed, I do thank you, lots."

"Never mind that; I 've got full and plenty, and no sister or anybody, and oceans of things I don't need. And there 's the old piano; if your father is ever able to give you a musical education, you shall have it."

Derry's heart was too full for words; but she gave her kind friend's hand a gentle squeeze, and wiped a tear or two from her long lashes.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT WAS THE MAN TO HER?

THE Ainsleys were alone again.

Kate, who had been indisposed, came downstairs just after Mrs. Beck had taken her leave.

"You have had some pretty loud callers, I should say," she said, seating herself in an easy-chair, and leaning her head back helplessly. "They waked me up."

"That Mrs. Beck is like a hurricane," said Tom, who had gone to work at his flies again. "You can always tell when she's coming, and you're always glad when she's gone."

"Hush, Tom!" said Stella, gravely.

"Oh, now you know we've had a menagerie here," Tom went on, laughing.

"I liked Mrs. Carew," said Stella; "her manners were so natural, and she had such pretty little ways. But as for the Becks!" she made a gesture of disgust. "What an important personage Fanny Beck thinks herself! One would imagine she had experienced thirty years of life, instead of fourteen."

"Her mother has engaged my sulky plough for to-morrow," said Mr. Ainsley; "that is, borrowed it."

"And you said 'yes'?" asked his wife.

"What could I do? People must be neighborly in such a place as this."

"She would n't scruple to borrow your house, if it was movable," said Tom.

"Did she get anything of you, mamma?" asked Stella.

"Only some patterns, and my last magazine. Oh, yes, a pair of scissors; she says she is going in town to get some to-morrow."

"She won't, as long as she can use yours," growled Tom. "I have to *beg* for scissors when *I* want them," he added in an injured tone.

"Well, some way I could n't help myself," said Mrs Ainsley; "I can't repeat the *modus operandi*, but certainly she has a way."

"What did you think of that other girl?" asked Tom, who was taking more than his usual share in the conversation; "she 's a downright cracker."

"I saw no harm in her," said Mrs. Ainsley, suppressing a smile as she remembered some of the girl's crude remarks.

"I just wish you could see the family; small crackers and big, — there must be a baker's

dozen," said Tom; "and such people! and such a house! But the girl is pretty, though. They say she is engaged to Hermit George, — that handsome man that everybody runs down and nobody knows why."

Stella went over to her mother's table, ostensibly for a spool of silk. A delicate flame crept over her cheeks, a half-scornful smile curved her lips. Then it occurred to her that the girl was certainly handsome, in a showy, attractive way. Why should she think of the matter at all? What was the man to her? Nothing; she had looked into his eyes only once. Was that to be once too often for her peace of mind? So careless a remark to set her pulses beating and her cheeks on fire! She was ashamed of herself; if all the stories going the rounds were half true, the man certainly could not be good.

There was a strange, despotic influence at work in her mind whenever she thought of him. It was as if through some occult power he had dominated her will. In vain her pride rebelled; in vain she reproved herself, day by day, for allowing his image to enthrall her imagination. She hoped never to see him again in one breath, and wondered where he made his haunts in the next.

Once she had seen him outside the church among the pines, his head bowed, his hat in

his hand, while she sang. And how she had sung that morning, wondering vaguely the while why he did not come in to worship like the rest.

Every Sunday she sang to him; she would not have acknowledged the fact even to herself, but she knew that from some green haunt, some leafy recess, he listened only to her, and that her lovely voice thrilled him to the depths of his being. The mystery of his life, his utter seclusion, the elegance of his manner, his extraordinary beauty, only intensified the charm by which, all unconsciously, he held her.

She was startled from her reverie, which had lasted only while she went to and from the table, by Russel, who made his appearance in his shirt-sleeves, — a thing he had never been known to do before. He seemed excited.

"Mrs. Beck's man came over for the sulky plough, father," he said; "did you tell Mrs. Beck she could have it?"

"I did," said Mr. Ainsley.

"And the chains, and the grub hoe, and a root of our scuppernong, and a well-bucket?"

"We talked about the other things; I don't remember her asking me to lend her them. She might."

"Why did n't she borrow the whole concern?" asked Russel, excitedly.

"My dear boy," said Mr. Ainsley in a helpless tone, "I could n't say 'no.'"

"They say nobody dare say 'no' to her. Next time, send her to me, please. Tell her I run the farm. There is n't a house in the settlement she does not lay under contribution. I 'll bet *I* can say 'no.'"

"Try him, father," said Tom; "he 'll be the first one."

"She won't ask me twice!" said Russel, as he stormed out.

"My dear Stella, that woman is worse than poor old Squire Beloit and his daughter," said Kate that night when she retired with her cousin. "We have acknowledged her by calling; now, what are we going to do about it?"

"I did n't dare add my quota downstairs," said Stella, and then stopped to laugh, "but I have been duped to the extent of a quarter's tuition in music for that remarkably forward child. Of course I shall never get my pay."

"I 'd have charged her two dollars a lesson," said Kate.

"I did, as she professes to be advanced. I might as well have charged twenty. In either case, I should have lost."

"I much prefer that bright-looking girl, the cracker, to Fanny Beck," said Kate. "She 's

pretty, and there is a suggestion about her that once upon a time she was a child."

"You mean Miss Derry Dunn — curious name, is n't it? When did you see her?"

"When she came, through the window-blinds. I had been bathing my poor head. She looked half frightened to death; not used to society, I should say."

"Not at all; Mrs. Carew has made her a sort of protégée."

"Shall you return the call?"

"Of course I shall. The Carews are respectable people. Mrs. Carew is just charming. Tom thinks there is n't another such woman in the world. He goes there sometimes."

"Did she slip grammar as easily as her husband?" asked Kate, laughing.

"I did n't particularly notice. I never do notice those things in persons I 'm bound to like. I think on the whole she was quite as correct as the majority of people. She looks just the woman to send a breakfast to a tired family the day after they come here."

"Did she do that?"

"She did."

"Then I vote her a darling. But who, pray, is handsome George, the hermit? Tom has spoken of him several times."

"Oh — I don't know — anything — I mean

much, about him," said Stella, suddenly faltering and turning away, "only that he is a very handsome man, and a thorough recluse." She let down her hair with a dainty shake of the head.

"Have you met him?"

"Yes, once;" and she swept round the long strands of her hair till they veiled her face and hid the almost painful scarlet of her cheeks.

"How romantic! Will it be possible for your humble servant to obtain a sight of this Florida wonder? Did he ever call here?"

"Mercy! no indeed — never!" was the explosive reply. "For all we know, he may be an outcast, and amenable to the laws of the land."

"Well! I never expected to come across a romance in this out-of-the-way place," said her cousin, evidently much interested.

"Oh, there 's no great romance about it; if there was, it would be known."

"Maybe he has loved and lost," said Kate, musingly, her voice a trifle pathetic.

"Maybe he has committed murder," said Stella, harshly.

"Mercy! don't imagine such a terrible thing! Border ruffians are not usually handsome and cultivated, nor do they often seek retirement. By the way, Tom said the man was

going to marry the little cracker girl, did n't he?"

"I hope he may; then there will be an end of it," said Stella, now coiling her hair about her shapely head, her face still hidden by her arms.

"An end of what?"

"Why, the — talk — and suspense; the wonderment of the vulgar, who are always looking for a sensation. One tires of it, you know."

"Well, perhaps, in time; but as this is the first opportunity I ever had to hear about him at all, my inquisitiveness is fresh and strong, and on the *qui vive* for wonders. *Is* he so very handsome?"

"He is, strikingly so. Have you any more questions?"

It was so stupid of Kate, she thought, to rattle on this way about a man for whom nobody cared; and her cheeks flamed anew.

"Yes, a dozen or so, perhaps. Does he live well — in a nice house, I mean?" pursued Kate, mercilessly.

"Why, how should I know?" Stella exclaimed, turning upon her cousin. "Why don't you ask Tom or Russel? I don't know or care how he lives, and — I 'm going to bed."

Astute Kate opened her eyes. "Why this vehemence?" she asked herself. "Stella has been

laboring under suppressed excitement ever since I mentioned the name of this man. Why, here 's a mine; I 'll work it. Her very features altered when she spoke of him. There 's something I can't understand. But I must manage to see this wonderful recluse, and judge for myself."

CHAPTER XVII.

"DON'T BE TRAGIC, MY DEAR."

THE next day it rained, to the delight of the Ainsleys, for the roads would be packed by Sunday.

It was arranged that after dinner on that day they should take some refreshments and go to the camp for a protracted session.

Sunday dawned, cool and beautiful. The tall pines sparkled under the sun, the sky was tenderly blue, with here and there a white cloud drifting and melting into ether.

Mrs. Ainsley and Russel remained at home; Stella and her father, Kate and Tom, filled the wagon. It was four miles to the grounds, and on their way they passed many nondescript teams filled with negroes, most of whom behaved with unwonted decorum, all of them dressed in their best.

The colors of the rainbow were at a discount, as Tom said, watching the various costumes that filed in to the grove-meeting, an area of five acres defined by a rough fence and marked by one

long, low, straggling building which had been erected for shelter in case of sudden storms.

It was a strange sight to Stella and her cousin, both of whom welcomed with pleasure the advent of Mrs. Joe and Derry, the latter smiling in fresh laces and ribbons, for her friend had been very thoughtful and liberal.

A large circle, with here and there a log for a boundary line, had been reserved for the speakers, and plenty of seats for the white visitors. Children abounded, frolicking in the shadows of numerous clumps of young water-oaks.

A little lake shone on one side, and an idle boat or two could be seen among the sedge-grass; but the lake was deserted to-day for the camp-ground.

As they seated themselves, it seemed to Stella that she had been removed to the farthest part of the universe. The tropical atmosphere soft as a baby's breathing, the dark faces swarming on every side, the elaborate conversation and strange dialect, the brilliant coloring, the gathering of an incongruous array of ebony ministers, made up an element that could not be paralleled outside of Florida.

"Who is that monkey of a man who never moves but he dances?" asked Kate. "I can't keep my face straight when I look at him."

Kate sat next to Mr. Ainsley, who was busily

taking notes, and Stella was next to her. Then came Derry, who used a red bordered handkerchief rather conspicuously, and next was Mrs. Carew.

Derry overheard Kate's speech. Looking timidly toward Stella, she said, the color surging up in her cheeks, —

"That's Hermit George's Canty — his man. He dances all the time, they say, except when he's at work. I expect he was born so. Folks say he's got springs in his heels."

"What a prize he would be for a negro minstrel troupe!" exclaimed Kate, — "a man with springs in his heels, — a caperer by nature! Hermit George is our handsome recluse, isn't he?" she asked maliciously, turning to Stella, who answered indifferently.

She was wondering whether the master of this unique dancer would be there.

The presence of so many of the "quality," as the blacks termed the Ainsleys, rather embarrassed the "chief mourners," as Tom called them; but at last the power they worked for came, and all was forgotten but the wonderful phenomenon that soon made its appearance.

"Pandemonium let loose," Tom said, in a whisper; and for one terrible hour so it seemed. Trances, shouting, howling, shrieking, were the order of the exercises.

Rising above all were the weird wild songs of African worship, than which nothing can be more suggestive of all the agonies, hopes, fears, and transports of the human heart. Ascending heavenward in a united appeal for mercy, falling in a rhythmic, plaintive soul-cry of humility and longing for peace, it went to the heart of more than one white listener as no music had ever done before.

Then came a lull in the service. Bright fires blazed in every available nook, and all kinds and sizes of tin kettles that would hold water were pressed in service as tea-brewers.

When they heard the horn for supper, Stella and Kate went over to look in the long log-house, which they did by standing at the open windows. All down the narrow tables, formed of rough planks resting upon cross-pieces of wood, stood women, men, and children, eating and drinking. Babies lay asleep on improvised couches, others of a larger size played in groups together. A red-hot stove sent up steam in huge volumes, and the smell of frying pork was very appetizing to those who relished such fare.

Presently came a brief period of darkness, when suddenly from a dozen points all over the camp shot up the red flames of the fat wood, bringing into strong relief the groups of negroes in their

picturesque attire, hurrying to secure seats, to be in readiness for the evening services.

There had as yet been nothing really grotesque in the programme; but presently a tall figure which was soon recognized as Carew's cook, Aunt Pruny, ascended the platform and began a strange harangue. It seemed that she was in the mood to anathematize, and it curdled the blood in Kate's veins as the long black arm with its lean fingers pointed toward their seats, and the woman began a scathing denunciation of the sins of white folks.

"Oh dear, I can't stand it!" she whispered, as faster and faster the tall, wiry figure rushed back and forth, her eyes shooting dull flames, her form looming up to an unearthly height, invective like a torrent flowing from her lips; and with Stella and Derry — whom Stella asked to accompany them — she crept into the shadow of a large hickory-tree.

"What a tongue-lasher!" said Kate, drawing a breath of relief; "actually, I think I should have died if I had stayed much longer. A splendid-looking woman she is, though, — like some old-time prophetess. Oh, such a relief to get out of hearing, all the same! And look, oh, look at that heavenly moon!"

Stella came out of the shadow, round by the other side of the tree, and found herself face to face with George Barron.

He was standing silent and absorbed, with folded arms, his head bare, — for he had placed his hat on the ground, — his face in full view in the pure white radiance of the moon. Evidently he had seen them coming.

Stepping aside with a profound bow, he moved over to the shadow of a small oak, under which his face and figure were less conspicuous.

"Of course that is he!" said Kate, speaking aside, and under her breath, "and — he is divine!"

"Nonsense!" said Stella, her face aflame, assuming a calmness she did not feel.

Derry presumed upon her long acquaintance with George Barron to point him out. How should she know that Stella had met him?

"It is Mr. Barron," she said; "the gentleman they call Hermit George; I don't think he likes to be called that, though. He is our neighbor." And emboldened by the consciousness that she was recognized and made much of by the ladies of the old Fenn house, she went forward and spoke to him.

"Let us go back," said Stella, turning away with an indifferent air.

"Not I," Kate made reply. "When that little minx gets through with her friend, fiancé, or what not, perhaps she will have the politeness to introduce him. He had eyes for nobody but you; and such eyes!"

"I *must* go," said Stella, with assumed firmness; but she was trembling from head to foot with the sudden shock of seeing him. "If you don't come I must go alone, that 's all."

"Well, you can go; but I shall stay. What! lose this only chance of a romantic meeting! No, no."

Presently the subject of their conversation came out from the shadow, Derry at his side. The girl was nervous, and eager to do herself credit.

"This is Hermit George," she began — "I mean Mr. Barron — and these ladies are Miss Stella Ainsley — and — Miss Ainsley — Miss — " She paused, having forgotten the name.

"Kate, my dear," said that vivacious young lady, in her quick, nervous fashion; then added, "I am none of Baptista's family, though."

"Nor am I a gentleman of Verona," he made apt reply, smiling. "You were never at a 'distracted' meeting, as my man Canty calls it, before, I imagine," he went on, addressing Kate, while his glance sought Stella, whose fair face looked saintly in the pure light. "I think he calls it the correct thing, for more distraction I never saw. These people, Hagar's children, — my man again, who is rather a quaint specimen of his class, — are really but infants in intelligence, masquerading as men and women. Of course

there are exceptions. Have you seen the convicts?"

"'Convicts?' Heavens! are there any of those wretched creatures here?" asked Kate, in real alarm.

"You are as much startled as I was when my man first spoke of them," he answered, smiling in a way that made his melancholy enchanting, Kate said afterward. "Know, then, that they who accept the gospel of these self-styled evangelists are considered 'convicts' in their language, — in ours, converts, — and 'are ready for the crown,' as Canty says."

He ended as before by a searching look in Stella's eyes.

She stood there, trembling with irrepressible emotion, her glance turned away, her exquisite figure showing to perfection, even to the lovely contour of her throat, looking only something less than angelic to him.

Derry watched him, breathless, startled, despairing; and Kate watched her.

"The woman who is speaking now is in the service of Mr. Carew," he went on. "She seems to be castigating the few white people who have done her the honor to be present. I am sorry she shows such bad taste. And yet I have found her a very kind-hearted woman — she was once in my father's family; but some trouble has

imbittered her. She has a very wild son; in fact, he ought to be in state-prison, and she knows it."

"She looks as if she might be remarkable in some way; I never saw such a sibyl's face," said Kate.

"She is remarkable. You did not see her at her best to-night. Something has evidently disturbed her. She is very eloquent at times."

At that moment the great congregation struck up a strange, wild air. The multitude could be seen swaying this way and that, their faces in the moonlight solemnly grotesque. Not a leaf stirred. The foliage of the water-oaks that stood in massive clumps, stately and tall, and broad of branch, glittered in the moon's full beams as though frosted with silver. The pines, straight as the masts of a ship, and wide apart, struck black lines on the gray footpaths and the grassy sward, and seemed reaching up to the very stars.

Richer and clearer, and wilder and sweeter, rose the weird harmony.

To shut the eyes and open the heart was to drink in the very music of heaven. Even when in the passion and abandonment of their untrained natures they threw in a note of wailing or a cry for mercy, it only intensified the pathos of the scene.

Stella could hardly bear it. Her throat swelled, and tears hung on her lashes.

Looking up, she caught the eyes of George Barron fastened upon her face with such a glance as only love can give, and the swift blood rushed to her cheeks.

Derry stood behind, taking note of every glance, breath, speech. Her poor little hands were clinched so tightly that the nails indented her flesh. Yet she would not have been conscious of physical pain, standing on red-hot coals, so intense was the pain in her heart.

In the silence succeeding the singing, Stella heard her father call her.

"There is papa. We must go," she said.

They bade Hermit George a courteous good-night.

Poor little Derry! he had quite forgotten her presence. There was no good-night for her, but anguish — such anguish as few can suffer — as she followed her companions, and all the world dead to her.

He stood looking after them, one figure alone attracting his attention, — looked till they were quite out of sight; then with a long, pained sigh he turned, went to where his horse was fastened, and galloped all the way home.

"My dear Stella," said Kate that night to her cousin, "if it was n't for one thing more than

another, I think I should hate you with a deadly hatred."

She was looking straight in the mirror, both palms pressed on the top of the bureau.

"What in the world are you talking about?" asked Stella, looking her surprise.

"I 'm not ugly," and the girl turned her face from side to side, so as to catch all the points, "indeed, I really think I 'm rather pretty. Some folks call me so; but I 'm not decidedly beautiful, and you are. The fact is, I 'm half in love with that grand-looking fellow, and I don't dare go the rest, if you 'll excuse the slang, because he 's more than half in love with you."

"Kate!" Stella's eyes flashed.

"Don't be tragic, my dear. Did n't I see it? Did n't that little cracker girl see it? Why, you could have kindled dead coals with the fire in her eyes. You don't believe me? I tell you there was a whole history in her dark, pretty little face when he looked at you as he did. Either her heart died within her or she hated you with a fierce hate, as she stood there. She worships him, — no, the words are tame, — so don't look at me that way. Could there have been any truth about her engagement to him? No, the idea is absurd."

"Kate, why will you run on so foolishly? You know he is nothing to me — can be noth-

ing to me. Let him marry that child; I 'm willing!"

"No, you 're not," retorted Kate. "Don't tell a story, my dear. He may marry her, to be sure, but — well, if I were you he should n't — not if I could help it. I never saw such a magnificent man in my life."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THE FELLOW IS UNDER AGE."

IT was not without the exercise of considerable self-denial that Hermit George kept closely at home, attending to his plantation, for a month after his experience at the camp of "Hagar's children," as Canty naïvely called his people.

Infatuated though he was with the beauty of Stella Ainsley to a degree that would have made him willing to endure any sacrifice for the sake of one look at her sweet face, he had compelled himself to refrain from a sight of her or her surroundings. It had formerly been one of his stolen pleasures to ride near the old Fenn house in the hope that he might catch a glimpse of the object of his adoration, — for with him the passion was nothing less.

Years of solitude had gauged the depth of his nature, and he knew his own strength. He had never loved before, and his man's heart could hold no shallow sentiment, no weak admiration. He was cast of the metal of which heroes and martyrs are made; and though he had forfeited

much — nay, all that a man may reasonably hope to enjoy — by one false step, yet he was brave enough to accept the situation, and labor on patiently till some way of escape should come, if it ever should. Meanwhile he suffered tortures which narrower natures were not capable of measuring, and suffered in silence.

The clock had struck ten one glorious moonlight evening, and he sat by his window smoking, and enjoying the beauty of the semi-tropical night. The broad leaves of the bananas were sheathed in a light inexpressibly bright and shining; the great cacti, their red and yellow blossoms plainly discernible, the monstrous leaves of the elephant plant, showing its blood-red veins, all glowed and twinkled and laughed in the mellow radiance that streamed to the remotest nook where a blade of grass could find a lodgment. There came a sound of horse's feet. The great gate was unbarred, and a buckboard, drawn by a large gray horse, drove up to the porch at the side of the house.

Hermit George hastened out. Such sounds were unusual on his premises.

Mrs. Beck was in the act of leaving the light vehicle, which was at that moment weighted almost to overturning.

"We really ought to beg your pardon, sir," she said, arranging her short black hair, and stam-

mering as she encountered the glance of his searching dark eyes, "but we were followed on our way, and having no arms were naturally very much frightened. So we turned in at the first house we could find. I hope we shall not trouble you."

"Not at all, madam," was the courteous reply; "make yourself comfortable."

"Norris thinks that perhaps we were disturbing the haunts of some people in the contraband business, — 'moonshiners,' I believe they are called."

"Quite likely," said Hermit George; "only I'll venture to say you were nowhere near their premises. Will you be seated?"

"Only to recover my breath," said the woman, as the young man and the girl, who looked so very young and childish, descended from the buckboard.

"My son, Mr. Barron — oh, I beg your pardon, my dear," she said to Norris Knowlton, "we were not to tell of it; but these two children took it into their heads to get married this afternoon, and" — she laughed and fidgeted with her hand-bag — "so I let them."

"Not this child!" said Hermit George, surprised out of his habitual composure.

"My dear sir, I married at fifteen," said Mrs. Beck. "Fanny is almost that."

"Great Heaven!" ejaculated her host, and with an effort brought himself round to be civil again.

"I have not been called a child for five years," said Fanny, pertly, with a giggle.

"No, Fanny was always very womanly; fully ten years older than her real age," said Mrs. Beck complacently, looking at him with big eyes. "I beg, however, you will not mention it just yet; I have my reasons."

"The fellow is under age," thought Hermit George.

"But, as I was saying, three men sprang out on us, nearly frightening poor Arab to death, and made us turn our horse, which we gladly did. For a long time we heard them behind us; and I thought if you would only lend us some kind of firearm, — for I am really afraid to go home."

"If you will permit me I will saddle my mare and ride with you as far as your place."

"That would be really too kind," she said; and in another moment he was going in the direction of the stable.

"Won the bet!" she exclaimed with suppressed exultation, as his figure vanished. "Is n't he splendid, though? If he had only asked us in! I should so like to see what a man-housekeeper is like!"

"It is neatness itself," said Fanny, who had darted in, and now ran out breathlessly; "mamma, it's perfectly lovely!"

"Well, I *am* lucky," mused Mrs. Beck.

"You are indeed — a new silk dress! Don't I wish it had been me?"

"Who bet?" asked young Knowlton.

"One of my gentlemen friends wagered a new silk dress against a beaver hat that I dared not beard the lion in his den; and here the lion is going to gallant us home. It was worth trying for; my old silk is threadbare. By the way, I wonder if he has a plane and gouge among his tools? If so, I'm going to borrow them. Nothing like making use of your friends."

"I could n't think why in thunder you told him that cock-and-bull story about being followed," said young Knowlton, laughing.

"Well, if it did n't happen to us then, it might some time. People have been followed in that very place."

"Well, you do know how!" said Norris Knowlton, admiringly. "I wish I did."

It is needless to say that under this woman's tuition he was fast learning how.

"But, mamma, you need n't have told him we were married," said Fanny. "He looked so funny!"

"It will have to be told, child, sooner or later."

Hermit George came up on his mare. They were all in the buckboard again, young Knowlton on an improvised seat in front.

"Could you take pity on us," asked Mrs. Beck in the sweetest accents, "and lend us a plane and a gouge, if you have them? I'm going to buy them the next time I go to the city."

"Certainly, madam. I will send them over to-morrow morning by Canty, — I always lend my man when I lend my tools, — that is, if you wish the work done at once, and then he can bring them back. I am rather fastidious with regard to my tools being used by strangers. Will that arrangement suit you?"

She saw the half-repressed smile that accompanied his offer.

"Oh, thank you," she said, with a dim idea that she had been measured by this handsome, eccentric person; and for once in her life a genuine blush reddened her cheeks.

Hermit George came slowly back, smiling to himself as he thought of the visit.

"It might be that Aunt Pruny's black Dick, with some of his comrades, followed them," he said to himself; "but more than likely the story was made out of whole cloth. That woman is a study, but one that would do more harm than good."

He gave his horse to Canty, and went inside,

thinking of bed; but the extreme beauty and hush of the night tempted him to the window and just one more cigar.

As he stood looking out, a voice sounded at some little distance, singing a refrain so sad, so beautiful, that he took the cigar from his lips and leaned forward to catch the words, —

"Oh, de Lawd take dese troubles
Out'n my breast;
Oh, de Lawd sen' his angels,
Carry me to my rest."

It sounded so weird in thirds and fifths, on the still night air, and the voice in all its cadences was so rich, so full of melody and heartbreak, that he almost held his breath, hoping for more.

Canty put his grizzled head in at the door.

"It 's Aunt Pruny. She say she in trouble — wants to see de marster."

"Certainly; tell Aunt Pruny she is always welcome," was the answer.

The woman at that moment made her appearance. With hands clasped over her breast, eyes lowered, motions retarded, she came before him, sank on her knees, and hid her face in her hands.

"Don't do that, Aunty; take a chair; you must not kneel before me."

"I 's got to 'fess," said the woman, slowly, and with a deep, dry sob.

"Well, what terrible thing have you got to tell me? Has Dick been up to any more mischief? Have they taken him?"

"I knows nothin' 'bout Dick, Marse George."

"Well, what have you, a pillar in the church, to confess to me, a heathen outside of it?"

"I 's a tarrible sinner, Marse George. I 's wuss dan my son Dick, whum yo' 've holp so offen 'cause I wor a slave in de family once, bress yo' big heart. I 's 'n offender 'thout fergibness. I 's done it wid mun eyes wide open. I 's made mis'ry fer de sweetest woman eber draw de bref o' life."

Canty stood, one ear to the keyhole, one leg in the air, preserving his equilibrium only by the most frantic efforts of arms and body.

"Lordy, dey 's taken de moonshiners!" he gasped, "'n' the ole lady 's killed somebody."

"Come, tell me all about it, and get off your knees and sit down like a Christian," said Hermit George.

"Dar ain't a letter 'n all dat blessed word replies to me," she moaned; "'n' I 's no right to set down befo' de Lawd, 'n' I won't do it. I 'll 'fess it all, jes as I am, —

> 'Jes as I am, widout no flea,
> Save dat dy blood wor shid fer me,' —

ef I can," she added solemnly.

"I 'll begun at de beginnin'.

"You knows I wor a bondwoman, fust in yo' grandther's family, den in yo' fader's. Dar 's whar my Lisbet wor born, 'n' she growed up a likely gal too, 'n' her fader took her in de house, 'n' she wor n't no common slave-gal, nother. She learn to read 'n' write, 'n' she sing like an angel, 'n' she play de origan, 'n' seems 's ef my ole heart wor wrop up in her. She wor almos' white, 'n' her cheeks like roses, 'n' her eyes like sparks o' fire."

"Is that your secret? I knew all about that, years ago."

"No, no — jes h'ar me furder. All dis wor one great plantation den, 'n' Cracker Joe, he live in one leetle corner wid his mammy, 'n' he 'n' she wor on'y pore low-down whites. Reckon he wor right young when dar come a black trouble, 'n' a pore little chile what took her mother's life when she wor borned.

"It jes purty nigh 'bout killed me, but I took de chile, 'n' dat ar Joe, he run away. Den when de chile somewher's 'bout fo' years, dar come letters 'n' money. I wor to put de chile in de car' of an aunt ob his, 'n' hev no mo' to do wid her. So den come de wah, 'n' mo' trouble, 'n' I wor glad to git shet o' she, knowin' she wor in good keepin'. So Cracker Joe, he put her to a fus-class school, 'n' dar she 's growed up, knowin' nothin' 'bout me 'cept dat I wor her nurse.

"Dat ain't de hull," she went on, as the hermit turned his head away towards the calm moonlighted space outside. "De gal is eighteen now, 'n' schoolin' 's ober, 'n' de aunt dat cared fer her, she 's dead, 'n' everybody 'longin' to her 's dead, 'n' de misstis ob de school don' know wha' to do wid her, 'n' de chile she think she comin' to her home 'n' fader, 'n' Cracker Joe, he 's got his new family, 'n' he 'n' me hed words 'bout it. I 'lowed I 's willin' not to be known as de gal's flesh 'n' blood — nuther did he; 'but what 's gwine ter be done?' sez I.

"Den he answer she mout go 'n' git her livin', or I could send fer her 'n' take car' o' her, 'n' good deal more that sounded tarrible; 'n' my temper riz, 'n' I ups wid a knife, 'n' only de Lawd's mercy kep' me from killin' him den 'n' dar. But 't wor on'y a cut on his arm; 'n' then — God forgive me! — I goes right ter Miss Luce, 'n' I tells her de hull story."

"That *was* cruel," said Hermit George. He was standing up now, white as chalk, his hair all in disorder, for he had passed his hand through it once or twice in unwonted agitation.

"Cruel! tell yo' 't wor murder! Down she fall wid one great cry. I 'd pierceted her to de heart wid dat tarrible news, 'n' I jes put out, fer I could n't face him, nor I could n't see her layin' thar like a cops; so har I am — jes 'scaped bein'

a murderer — 'n' wuss; for dem dat kills de sperit is wuss dan dem dat kills de body."

"It was pretty hard," said her auditor, in low, strained tones; "I pity that poor woman!"

"Yes, I tole her everythin' — how 't I wor the chile's granny 'n' her mar wor a bondwoman, 'n' I reckons it 'll kill her. Lawd, what 'll I do? Yo' 's bin good ter me fo' now — I don' d'serve nothin' but de jedgment o' de Lawd 'n' de hate ob de whole livin' world."

He turned and looked at her, her stately head bowed in shame and remorse, and a spasm of pain seemed to contract his features as he spoke.

"Who am I, that I should sit in judgment on you, Aunty? Thank God with all your heart that His mercy kept you innocent of blood-guiltiness. There 's nothing weighs so heavily as blood! *that* cries from the ground forever and forever!"

His right hand was uplifted, his face stern yet grand in its patient sorrow.

"You have thoughtlessly perhaps, in your anger certainly, struck home to a heart that never harmed you. It is hardly possible to atone for it, and you cannot go back to Carew's. Here, take this key. It belongs to the little tenement house just back of the big oak. You 'll find a bed there, and some furniture. Take possession till matters are changed somewhat.

I 'll send Canty over in the morning with your breakfast. To-morrow I 'll find something for you to do. Canty is not very expert as a housekeeper."

Canty, who had listened diligently, and only heard a few words now and then, heard this, and made a wry face.

"Dat comes o' lissening to ole mudders in Isra'l," he muttered. "I is n't quite master ob de hull situation, 'cause I could n't h'ar instinctly; but I kin guess some, 'n' I knows de rest. No wonder she so hard on de white sinners. Oh, gosh alive! I 's got a secret!" and he danced back to his loft over the kitchen.

CHAPTER XIX.

"OH, JOE! THEN YOU MARRIED HER!"

AUNT PRUNY took the key, the tears running down her face, and stole out into the moonlight. Unlocking the cabin door, she went in softly, turned the key on the inside, and then fell helplessly on the floor with a groan that was full of anguish.

Just so had her mistress fallen when Aunt Pruny burst from the house, and Cracker Joe, who had just finished binding up the wound in his arm, with the aid of his man Croon, heard her cry and fall, and rushed to her room to see her lying unconscious on the floor.

"Great Heaven! that devilish nigger has told her!" he exclaimed, as he lifted the fainting form and placed his wife among the pillows on her bed. "Now I am in a pretty scrape!" he muttered. "I don't know but it would have been better for the woman to finish me, as she meant to. Lucy will never forgive me. My poor little girl! Women can't overlook them things — and she can't understand. Lord! what whips a man

makes of his follies! Lucy!" he called, "Lucy, darling, Lucy! there, there, don't mind that wicked old hag, my darling! She only wanted to revenge herself on you to spite me."

"Oh, Joe!" and the blue eyes opened. "Oh, the poor thing! how I pity her! But, Joe — oh, I can't believe it!" and she hid her face, shuddering. "I always had such faith in you!"

"Don't lose it now, Lucy, when I need it more than ever."

"Oh, Joe! Joe!" and the bed shook with her sobs.

"Devil take it!" muttered Joe between his teeth. "See here, little woman — Lord! I wish the nigger hed killed me 'n' done with it!"

Lucy looked up, her eyes still streaming.

"Did she try?" was her frightened question. "Tell her to go. I never want to see her again. Now I know why you hated her so. I see, — oh, so many things! I used to wonder what her queer sayings meant. I don't, any longer. But — oh, Joe — I believe my heart is broken! Tell me — is it all true?"

His eyes fell, — those beautiful eyes that always looked so straight in her own.

"I s'pose I must say yes," he answered; "'tell the truth and shame the devil.' I won't lie. Yes, yes, it's all true, every word of it," he said, in a low, pained voice.

"Oh, Joe!" then came another series of sobbing interjections.

"But the girl shall never darken these doors," he said savagely.

"Oh, Joe! she has a right, — you know she has a right here! How can she help — what she is? Poor, poor child, to be so terribly deceived! Why did n't you t–tell me be–before we were married? I should have been shocked, of course; but I might — might have forgiven you."

"No, you would n't. It 's just the one thing women of your sort won't overlook. Not that I blame you. I 'll be damned — yes, I will say it — if I would. If you can hate me worse than I hate myself when I think of my — blamed foolishness, why, you can take the cake, that 's all."

"It was n't foolishness, Joe, — one could overlook that; it was downright sin."

"Well, yes, p'r'aps it was; at any rate, it was if you say so; but it can't be helped now, can it? 'N' you can guess what it has been to me all these years. I had to keep that whining nigger when I could have strangled her for her impudence time and again. Well," — and he drew a long sigh, — "it 's out now, and you know the worst of it. I s'pose I 've lost your respect forever."

"You used to seem so frank and open-hearted, Joe — and so kind to father! I thought you everything that was good and noble and manly —

and now to think — now — to know — I wonder if I shall get used to it in time?" and she ended with a long-drawn groan and more sobs.

Joe sat there, his head on his breast, like a convicted criminal.

Suddenly he started up, his brow heavy with the gloom of his thoughts.

"I'll put an end to this!" he said. "Good Lord! I can't live, and you thinking evil of me. You 're the only woman I ever loved. She, that other, a bright, good-looking girl, thought if she could only marry a white man, no matter how low down he wor, her fortune was made; and so —"

His wife had started up, her hair all dishevelled, a perfect cascade of gold and brown falling over throat, bosom, and shoulders, and reaching out she plucked his sleeve, hanging to it. Her eyes and cheeks flamed as with fever, her breath came short.

"Joe, what did you mean?" she asked, her chest heaving; "*if she could only marry a white man!*"

"I meant what I said; and I was fool enough to marry her."

His head fell in his hands; he sat there, the picture of despair. But what is this? A pair of soft arms encircle his neck; little by little his wife creeps toward him.

"Oh, Joe! then you married her!"

"Of course I did." He turned toward her, wondering at her shining eyes, and the way she looked at him.

"Oh, Joe! then I don't care. You darling! you have made it all right. Kiss me, Joe!"

He looked at her confounded — speechless with astonishment.

"I was afraid — oh, I was so afraid it was — disgrace, for her, poor thing!" and she hid her eyes on his shoulder; "and that, perhaps she — the victim, the mother — died of a broken heart. It's all right, Joe, and I — I — love you better than ever. You married her!" she repeated, in a sort of triumph.

"Didn't I say I was fool enough? Most women would have winked at — the other, would'nt they, rather than hear that I, a white man, married a slave, the natural child of old Barron."

"No!" said Lucy, with strong emphasis; "most women would not, — good women, I mean. What if she was a slave? If death had n't made her free, the war would. Oh, Joe! I feel like another woman." She gathered the wealth of shining hair and threw it back over her shoulders. "Of course you had a right to marry whom you chose; it doesn't trouble me what her condition was. Pruny said she was pretty and accom-

plished, and well treated by her father's family. Joe, you dear old soul! you must forgive me for my suspicions. I feel ashamed of myself. Poor Aunt Pruny! I don't wonder she was imbittered. I can see how it all was — you being Southern born, with all the prejudices of the old *caste* days."

"And this was the woman was going to hate me — and good reason had she; and now here she is, praising me to my face, and I in that state a word more or less would have driven me desperate!" muttered Joe.

"All because you were good and honorable, my dear husband, and have really given that poor child the right to bear your name. In any case, she should have come. Right is right, and I would have made room for her, and in time got used to the thoughts I could n't have helped having, could I? But now, I shall be very proud of her. She has been to school all these years; she is good and pretty and accomplished. If she loves our little darlings, — they belong to her in a way, you see, — why, she will help educate them. I shall have somebody to keep me company when you are gone, and to help me in many ways. No doubt she knows much more than I do — a poor miner's daughter. Oh, Joe, do send for her! I know I shall love her, for she belongs to you!"

Joe was looking at two or three Lucys through

the tears that had welled up to his eyes. Half a dozen pairs of brown orbs were dancing to happy thoughts in that same illusive moisture. He was not quite sure if he was the desperate, miserable man who had begun the evening with a quarrel, even to the extent of bloodshed.

"And poor Pruny! Do make haste and find her. Does she know you were married?"

"No; the secret died with her daughter," said Joe. "She might have told — I never hindered — but she knew how I felt, so she never did."

"Poor soul! Aunt Pruny must know it," said his wife; "and you must tell her, you bold, bad man!" and she tapped his hand playfully.

"But you don't see the degradation of the thing, — a white man to marry a slave! I had to keep it a secret, or my life was at stake, ye see. 'T ain't allowed; no, 'n' you never *would* see. What a woman you are!"

"I 'm a very happy one, if that 's all. I think I could n't have lived if it had been the other way, and that girl here to haunt me. Now I shall welcome her; now I will be a mother to her. Oh, Joe! I can't hug you tight enough — I 'm so thankful!"

"Well, to be sure, here 's a Christian!" said Joe, "and shames me, yes, and teaches me my duty. There 's one I 'm doing a wrong, and,

God helping me, I'll put him out of his misery, if he 'n' his *have* injured 'n' hated me in times gone by."

Mrs. Joe rose from the bed, bathed her eyes, bound up her bright, soft tresses, and replaced the comb that confined them. Then she went into the living-room, took a peep at the children to make sure they were resting well, and put her hand on the latch of the kitchen door.

"Don't go out there, Lucy," said Joe, placing his hand on hers.

"Why not?" she asked.

"It's not fit. Pruny and I — we quarrelled, you know — "

"For Heaven's sake!" and her eyes grew wild again, "you did n't hurt her?"

"No, but she hurt me. But don't look so wild; it will heal in a few days."

"But you stagger!"

"And so do you!"

"The house is falling!" she shrieked; "go save the children!"

CHAPTER XX.

"SHE MIGHT GO 'N' HURT YOUR FATHER."

AFTER a few moments of utter prostration, Aunt Pruny struggled up from the floor, her face lined and furrowed as if with years of care and suffering.

She stood where she had risen, the moonlight falling all about her (for the little cabin had no shutters), brightening her coarse apparel and giving her countenance that strange, suggestive character that made one think of the prophets and warriors among the women of Israel.

Close up to one of the open windows grew a splendid pomegranate tree, on which some of the blood-red fruit had been allowed to remain. Beyond, the slender pines rose like so many pillars carved for the everlasting temple of Nature, and the dark-blue overarching sky seemed a fitting roof studded with blazing stars.

"I 's sold my birthright!" she murmured, clasping one hand over the other, "'n' given Satan command over me. Dar ain't no use fightin' on any mo'; Isra'l mus' git along 'thout me; good-by, Isra'l."

She went toward the window and looked out.

"It's mighty still. 'Pears like all creation listening for my c'nfession. Dar's de berry spider's web dar, a shinin' in de dew, like it wor ten tousand ob eyes a watchin' me. Good Lawd! what makes it so still?" she cried in a tone of passionate entreaty. "Hab mercy, O Lawd, 'n' set de wheels ob de universe a jarr'n' agin! Don' punish yo' po' chile dis yer way!"

Suddenly a low, sullen rumble sounded; then followed a trembling through all Nature, and there, as Aunt Pruny stood at the window, the trees rocked, the earth throbbed, and the cabin swayed like a ship at sea.

The woman gave one unearthly cry, and flung herself out of the window.

The wheels of the universe, according to her wild appeal, were most assuredly "jarring," for the ground was lifting like the billows of the sea, with a shock of earthquake. Such a frightened, imploring face as the woman held up toward the sky, haggard beyond haggardness, her eyes full of her soul's despair, as she ran on and on, never stopping till she saw a group in front of an enclosed lot, all screaming and shouting and imploring mercy.

Foremost among them was Mrs. Dunn, her apron unconsciously gathered up in one hand, while with the other she dashed this way and that

a much-frayed palm-leaf fan, as she cried in a plaintive voice, —

"Oh, whar's Jim? Jim, quit them moonshiners! the Lord's callin' ye! Yo' ought to be to home, Jim; what'd I do alone, — a widder with ten children?"

Then she spied Aunt Pruny, who had stopped from sheer want of breath.

"Mother, don't be so silly; you frighten the children!" exclaimed Derry, running among the scared flock, shaking one and soothing another. "It's only a bit of an earthquake; don't I tell ye it's all over?"

"But it'll come again," sobbed Mrs. Dunn; "'n' I would n't mind ef Jim was only har, for ef we's goin' to die, we might's well all die together."

"Whar is Jim?" asked Aunt Pruny, like one having authority. "You don't done tell me he's down to dat place o' darkness?"

"He went to-day," whimpered Mrs. Dunn, — "'arly in the mornin'."

"So, they's at it to-night," said the woman, her eyes kindling, her brow clouded, while the children, scarcely over their fright, began to search round for "chinks" in the earth. "I'd like to ketch 'em thar, — 'fore the Lord, I would. I's gwine dar."

"See here, Aunt Pruny, be you crazy?"

It was Mrs. Dunn who spoke. She caught the

woman by the arm, and was absolutely hanging to her.

"Don't yer know," she whispered, "they're law-breakers? They 'll hit ye, sure 's yer name 's Pruny. Don't go thar, for God's sake!"

The woman was so excited that she trembled. Aunt Pruny's life hung in the balance, but so did Jim's. This black priestess was capable of anything. She would as soon betray her own son as any stranger.

"I'm a goin', honey. My time's up here. Cracker Joe 'n' I, we quarrelled 'bout old times, 'n' I 'm a goin' after them law-breakers, 'n' ef I sells my life, I sells it in a good cause. So let me 'lone, gal; I has my frien's. Hummit George, he 's been as good ter me as his father wor bad. He done give me a home to hide my ole head in; but I jes wants to get out'n des yer place, dat 's all I wants."

"Don' yer go whar black Dick is; mine what I tole ye," said Mrs. Dunn, shedding her cape-bonnet with the energy of her head-shaking, and catching it as it fell; "he 's got a good deal agin ye, — says yo' almos' sold him more 'n once. Come, stay long 's yo' like with us. Dar 's cotton-pickin' in a few days, 'n' we 'll want a little holp extry."

"No, chile, I can't, I can't!" said the woman, with energy. "I 'd git de blue staggers, 'n' I 've

lost de love 'n' respec' ob de hull comunicky. No, I 's gwine to dem ar moonshiners wid law 'n' vengeance!" and she lifted her clenched hands.

Mrs. Dunn made a gesture of deprecation and fell back against the fence, her dull eyes fixed full upon the woman before her, who seemed looking worlds beyond. Then Aunt Pruny moved on. Mrs. Dunn went droopingly into the house, surrounded by her flock, who were now laughing hilariously. Only Derry stayed behind and followed after Aunt Pruny, whom she had known all her life.

"Aunt Pruny," she said falteringly, and there was a sense of misery in her very voice, "take me with you. I'm tired to death; I want to get away — oh, so far away!"

"Git out, yo' D'rinthy! what you tired ober? Hain't got nothin' to do but be happy, yo' is n't. I heard over to de camp, or somewhar, yo' wor gwine ter be merried to Marse George Barron. Ef da 's so —"

"Who told you?" the girl interrupted breathlessly.

"Well, I don't rightly know 's I 'members."

"Was it Mrs. Carew?"

"No, chile, no," said Aunt Pruny with a sigh, as the question recalled bitter thoughts. "She dono Hummit George much, 'n' Mr. Joe he b'ars him hate. 'T wor some o' my people — I can't

'call 'em — somebody 'at 's seen yo' at de camp de odder night."

Derry gave one low cry, let her face fall on the black shoulder, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Oh, Aunt Pruny, that 's all a lie," she quivered, wiping her wet eyes with her hair which hung on each side of her shoulders; for she had taken the braids down just before the earthquake came, preparatory to retiring.

"Oh, Pruny, I have n't anybody to go to. Mother would n't understand; dear, good Mrs. Carew is too far above me, 'n' she has n't never known any trouble like this."

Aunt Pruny made a dramatic gesture, and groaned audibly.

"So I can tell it to you — you won't laugh at me; you 're in trouble yourself. Oh, how gladly I 'd go with you 'n' hide away somewheres! Can't I? *He* don't care nothin' about me — nothin'; it kills me to think it."

"Den dar ain't no fundation for that report," said Aunt Pruny. "I thought you liked him, honey."

"Liked him! liked him! Aunt Pruny, do you know why I want to git out'n the world? Let me whisper: I told him — I — loved him! Yes, I did! No other girl ever did such a dreadful thing, I expect. Yes, I went there — it was one

day; little Wash was there asleep, and Mr. George was waitin' for him to be called for. I forgot everything, Aunt Pruny; I jes prayed to him — on my knees. I said I 'd be like a servant, a slave, to him — yes, I did! Even a black girl would n't have forgotten herself so far, would she? But I saw him one Sunday, outside the church, 'n' he took his hat off 'n' bowed his head when *she* sung, 'n' it sort o' took away my senses, 'n' I would know the truth of it, 'n' so — nobody knows it but him 'n' me."

Ending with a low cry, Derry threw herself on Aunt Pruny's ample black bosom, and the woman, compassionating her distress, put an arm about her.

"Well, well, honey," and she patted her on the shoulder, her very body shaking with the girl's heavy sobs, "he 'll neber tell; he 's a hull man, he is. But who is *she*, chile, 'n' what did he say?"

"Oh, Aunt Pruny, he was so sorry!" The girl turned away her tear-stained face. "He lifted me up, and he went with me out in the garden, 'n' there he said he should n't never forgit how I 'd confided in him, 'n' he treated me like a lady; but, oh — he told me — he had never loved but one woman — 'n' — that was n't me!" Her sobs stopped her again.

"But who is it? Tell me dat, honey."

Derry put her hands over her eyes as if even the moonlight hurt them.

"It's Miss Stella Ainsley, who lives in the old Fenn house; 'n' I might 'a' known it, 'n' I *did* know it," she added, stamping her foot angrily; "on'y I loved him above heaven and earth, 'n' God, 'n' everything. I love him so, I 'd die for him! Oh, I love the very air that blows over him and the very ground he walks on — I do, I do, I do! He was always so kind to me, I forgot the difference between us," she added in a low, hard voice.

"Come, come, honey — must n't take on dat ar way; dat kind o' love is wha' de good Lawd never 'lows. It 's makin' an idle ob de wrong objec'. I 've did de same, honey; I 's loved de creeter more dan de Crater, 'n' I 's jes gittin my punishment dis yer minnit. Yo' sins *do* fin' yo' out; but look up, honey; 'deed 'n' 'deed I 's sorry fer ye — I is, chile — on'y it won't do to love dat ar way, honey."

"But, Aunt Pruny, I can't help it!" cried the girl, almost with a scream.

"Den yo' 's got fer ter be displinated like I has, on'y it 'll be sho'ter work wid yo', case yo' 's young 'n' I 's old. Marse George 's a gen'l'm'n, every inch of he, a high-up man, tho' he wor bred 'n' borned here in dis yer bery place almos' I 's a standin' on. I 'd a trust anybody wid Marse George."

"Oh, he was so good to me that day; too, too good to have to be so cruel. And he come almost home with me, and talked to me like a minister, 'n' I thought I *could* b'ar it; but when he 'd gone I jes wanted to die, 'n' I 've wanted to die ever since. If I only could git away!"

"Yo' time hav' n't come," said Aunt Pruny, with solemn emphasis. "Yo' must stay 'n' b'ar yer trouble. Take it to de Lawd, honey, take it to de Lawd. Now I must go, 'n' what I says, I says partin', never to meet no mo', p'r'aps, in dis low spere; yo' mus' be thankful it is n't a black sin yo' 've gotten on yo' soul."

She went on, moving her hands and shaking her head as she broke into a low refrain, her voice trembling, her gait unsteady.

Derry stood there like a statue cut in silver, very pallid, watching the slowly retreating figure, a look of fixed anguish in her face.

The girl had changed very much in the last few weeks. From a blooming lass with the brightest smile, an imagination unbridled, a will unchecked, she had grown into a sad-faced, absent-minded woman. All her light-hearted, merry wiles were forgotten. Everything to her diseased mentality had changed, and for the worse. The men who came to the cabin sometimes, bringing with them casks and bottles and cards, she looked upon with detestation, and

would scarcely have been surprised, any night, to see the officers of the law come in and arrest them all, her father included.

By the latter she was suspected, and often scolded mercilessly, while comparisons were drawn daily between Mandy and herself which irritated but did not impress her. Instead of profiting by them, she thanked Heaven she was not like Mandy, who had been so patient and spiritless, and had worked her way into the grave in early womanhood.

It is not surprising that, reflecting constantly as she did on the almost unprecedented fact that she had thrown herself at the feet of the man she loved, in a fit of aberration (for it can be called nothing else), a lasting sense of shame, an ever-abiding humiliation, should crush her to the earth, making life, even to her untried girlhood, a thing hard to bear.

Very slowly she turned, and very reluctantly she walked toward the cabin, which under the softening rays of the moon and the shadows of the trees looked picturesque and almost beautiful standing in the midst of tall banana clumps whose giant leaves seemed painted on the amosphere, they were so still and stately.

The children were huddled together playing cards in the farthest corner of the large room. Mrs. Dunn sat on a low chair that had no back,

her elbows on her knees, her hands on each side of her forehead, under the big sun-bonnet. Opposite her crouched their nearest neighbor, a small, wrinkled, mahogany-colored woman, smoking a cob pipe, which she now and then took from her lips to enunciate her theories concerning the earthquake.

Derry's quick temper took fire at this unwonted sight.

"If I could n't git anybody but niggers to keep me company, I 'd go without," she said in a sharp voice.

"D'rinthy!" exclaimed her mother, plaintively, as the mulatto, with an exclamation neither refined nor womanly, flouted out of the room.

"Well, mother, if we be low-down whites, I won't have niggers for my companions, nor you sha' n't ither," said the girl.

"She might go 'n' hurt your father," said Mrs. Dunn, querulously; "black Dick is courtin' her Sally."

"Well, if father 's in any business he should n't be in, he ought to be hurt; that 's all I 've got to say."

"And that Pruny, I 'low she 'll git herself 'n' all of 'em in trouble. She ain't got no sense, that woman hain't," said Mrs. Dunn.

"I reckon Aunt Pruny knows what she 's about," said Derry, brushing up the hearth.

"Oh, dear, you 're so changed, D'rinthy! You 're not a bit like Mandy, who cheered me up when I wor down-sperited, 'n' rubbed my pore hands fer me when I 'd got rheumatism bad 's I 've got it now. I don't bleeve in children, no way," she added bitterly.

"I 'll rub your hands, mother," said the girl, her manner changing; "I did n't know they ached."

"'N earthquake, 'n' your man in danger, 'n' everything goin' wrong 's enough to set anybody achin' all over; 'n' I wish Jim 'd come home," said the woman in a fretful voice. "Derry, go 'n' pour me out a leetle whiskey 'n' sweeten it, thet 's a good girl!"

"*Must* you have it, mother?"

"Well, I reckon ef yo' hed rheumatiz, 'n' felt down in the mouth, knowin' all the time that trouble was comin', you 'd like a drop ef you 's as old as me."

The girl went to a closet and took down a yellow pressed glass bottle. From this she poured some of the strong liquor into a broken tumbler, watered and sweetened it, and carried it to her mother.

"Lord, D'rinthy, how pale ye are!" exclaimed the woman; "drink some yourself; 't 'll keep off the agur; I 'm feared it 's on you."

The girl shuddered.

"I 'd drink a quart if it would— No—I won't

touch it. You 'n' father like it; two 's enough in a family."

"Well, why should n't we, — your dad 'n' I? We 're gittin it fer nothin'."

"S'pose they caught 'em at it!" whispered Derry. "It 's states-prison; nice to have father there for life, would n't it? A little worse than bein' low-down crackers! If it ever does come to that," she added, as her mother looked up, scared and white, "I 'll go — 'n' see — ef I can't find — Mandy!"

Her voice was broken.

Mrs. Dunn set the tumbler down in a scared way. "Lord, D'rinthy," she whimpered, "you 're goin' to be the death of me, I do bleeve. What 'tween earthquakes and bein' set on by your own childern, what 's the use o' livin'? I alleys hed a helper 'n' consoler in Mandy. She had n't no high-flown notions 'bout things. I know who 's put all them idees inter yer head, 'n' I wish he wor in heaven, I do."

"You don't know what you 're talkin' about," said Derry, all in a trembling passion. "If you mean Mr. George, whatever is good in me I owe to him. I wonder he ever took any notice of me, a gentleman like him!"

Mrs. Dunn rocked to and fro and was silent, feeling in her dazed way that Derry had the best of the argument.

CHAPTER XXI.

"HE'LL FIND ME AT HOME."

CANTY had attended to Byrnie for the night, stopped a moment with his hands in his pockets to look at the moon, growled over the expectancy of working for that "rackless woman" — as he called Mrs. Beck — on the morrow, then danced himself into the house.

The clock was striking eleven, and Canty had just tiptoed round the kitchen with ludicrous gesticulations, when something struck him on the head. It was the kitchen floor; but whether it had come up to him, or he had gone down to it, the negro could not for a second or two make up his mind.

He sprang to his feet; the house was dancing this time, the beams cracked, an unearthly roar sounded underneath the foundations, the candlestick with the candle burning sprang off the shelf, the crockery snapped and rattled, and Canty, writhing and shrieking, felt his way to the door, every substantial thing vibrating to falling, and he in agony lest he should be buried under the ruins.

"Marse George!" he gasped, as he swayed along, now lifted, now lowered, "d–d–d–day o' jedgment 's come! W–w–whar 's de Lawd gwine ter find yo'?" he cried hoarsely, as the second shock sent him reeling the length of the passage-way.

"He 'll find me at home," said Hermit George, who was grimly watching the antics of his windmill, which swayed almost to falling. He stood on the side porch, cigar in hand.

Harper and Minny, the two dogs, ran howling to his feet. Tip, his favorite cat, was sitting on his shoulder, frightened, yet conscious of protection. A flock of geese had gathered at the steps, and all the hens were running hither and thither, cackling their apprehensions. Byrnie's frightened snorts could be heard from the stable; and Canty, throwing himself on his knees, wriggled and prayed alternately.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, even if it should be the day of judgment," said Barron; "what 's the matter? You talk of it glibly enough at other times."

"I–I–'s n–n–not p–p–repar'd, 'n' I r–r–ode B–yrnie l–last T–tuesday n–night, 'n' I b–borrowed two p–pounds o' f–flour, 'n' c–carried it to G–granny B–lack, 'n' I d–dug some t–taters fer her; 'n' Lawd! I 's 'n unworthy nigger, anyhow," he added, shaking from head to foot as the

third and heaviest shock made the house lurch like a ship at sea; and off went Canty, head-first to the ground, righted himself, and flew over the path to the gate so fast that the tails of his long calico coat stood out straight behind him.

Barron gazed after him, laughing.

"I thought Byrnie looked rather fagged out the other day," he said to himself in an undertone. "As to this quake, it is n't half so bad as I have known out in Montana; and if Canty confessed all his steals, it would be a day of judgment for him, poor fellow! Well, I imagine the worst is over; I 'll turn in."

Canty presented himself in the morning the picture of humility; and though he skipped once or twice as he went about his daily avocations, still it was very much like the efforts of a draggled hen to be cheerful on a rainy day. His employer met him with an unruffled brow and the kindest words, binding the man to him as with hooks of steel; and Canty made a mental declaration that he would never take a single thing from land or larder, unless — there is always a margin left in a negro's promise — there was an emergency that could be bridged over no other way.

CHAPTER XXII.

"I MOUT 'A' STOPPED AT HIM!"

IT was only natural that at such a time Barron should feel some anxiety concerning the family at the Fenn house.

His first impulse had been to send and learn for himself how the Ainsleys had fared during this unusual visitation; but his resolute will forbade what he felt would, under the circumstances, be an intrusion.

"She has her father and her brothers," he said to himself; for it is needless to say, in his mind the "family" resolved itself into Stella. "Besides, what can she ever be to me but a blessed memory?"

He heard, the day following, from Canty, that Mrs. Ainsley was ill of nervous prostration, and that the whole family had been very much frightened.

Mrs. Beck's house had suffered most. Her kitchen, a slight structure at the end of the house, was in ruins, and speculation was rife as to who among the carpenters of the burg would be hardy

enough to assume the work of restoration under her promise to pay.

Aunt Pruny, after parting with Derry Dunn, went on her way, sighing and muttering, now and then apostrophizing the moon, the stars, and the whole heavenly firmament, in her wild sense of her sin and degradation.

The place for which she was bound was some five miles away. She felt half prophet, half avenger, as she strode on, compelling herself to reason that the only way she could atone for her great crime was to try to save others. The picture of her kind mistress, white as any lily, lying broken on the ground, and to whose heart she had sent a poisoned arrow, pursued her.

"I mout 'a' stopped at *him*," she muttered; "but, no, I must destroy her peace of mind f'rever 'n' ever, worl' widout end; God forgive me — amen."

An owl gave a shrill cry from some near covert.

"De bery birds ob de a'r tells me how mis'able I is!" she groaned.

All at once her hitherto magnificent strength failed her. She stopped, breathing hard. Such a thing had never happened before.

"Wha''s de matter? wha''s de matter?" she asked sternly, compelling herself to move on a few steps. Then she sank to the ground.

"'Fore my Heavenly Marster, I bleeves I's gwine to die like a dorg by de roadside," she said, the tears brimming her eyes. "But I won't! In de strenf of de Lawd I 'll git up 'n' git."

Compelling herself to rise, she held by the rude fence that bounded somebody's forty acres. On she crawled, feebly enough, till presently she came in sight of a two-roomed cabin, outside of which stood a group of negroes talking about the earthquake, which in its giant strides had shaken their poor little log-house to its very foundations.

"It 's my 'pinion de 'arth wor stratching itse'f," said a middle-aged negress, whose year-old baby, mounted astride her shoulders, its fat feet locked together under her chin, seemed to find much amusement in pulling at the crop of wiry little pigtails standing out in all directions over its mother's head.

"Mo' like it humped," muttered an old white-headed negro called Deacon Jones. "D' ye aver seen my ole Tom put up his back 'n' spit? Da' 's de moshun."

"I 's seen my ole no-count, no-ha'r mule double hesef like lightnin'," said a younger man; "dar 's more things like mules dan humans, I reckons."

"Sho, chil'n!" said a very aged woman, who sat on the steps smoking her pipe; "I knows

wha' it wor [*puff*], — a convulsion [*puff, puff*], — a convulsion, what convulsions ginly is in folks; dey twitches, 'n' dey joggles, 'n' dey jumps. De ole worl' [*puff, puff*] ain' gwine to live foreber. It 's gray-headed and rheumaticky, I reckons; da' 's wha' 's de matter, 'n' it 's gwine ter die — da' 's wha' it is."

A hollow voice near, startled them.

"Yes, chil'ns, I 's afeared I is."

It was Aunt Pruny, who had crawled round the back part of the cabin.

The women jumped and shrieked, and even the men were startled enough to run a step or two.

"It 's on'y me," said Aunt Pruny, hobbling toward them. "I 's took, 'n' nowhars ter go."

"Why, so 't is, it 's Pruny; it 's de mudder 'n Isra'l," said the woman with the baby. "You, Cal," she added, addressing a moon-faced girl who was leaning against the cabin door, "go put some clean sheets on de bed 'n de secon'-bes' chamber room; quick, gal, 'n' git all de fixin's righted, ginly. Don' yo' trouble yo'se'f, Aunt Pruny; Zebediah, he sleeps mos'ly in de hummock, 'n' Mr. McCrackin, what 's preachin' on de circus — "

"Circuit, Susan Brown," interrupted Elder McCrackin, mildly, yet with dignity.

"Well, da' 's what I meant; he 'll kull hisself

on de sofry, 'n' Cal, she kin fin' a bed anywhar outside de kitchen chimley. Dar, now it's ready. Deacon, you ketch holt o' one side, 'n' I ketches holt o' t'other. Now, Aunt Pruny, a leetle hot yarb-tea 'll do yo' lots o' good, 'n' I've got catnup, 'n' sparmint, 'n' humlock, 'n' bayberry bark. 'T wor de 'arthquake dat set ye kind'r inside out, I s'pect; dey's mis'able comforters."

Aunt Pruny by this time was quite past protesting, and hung a limp, heavy weight in the arms of her helpers, who soon had her snugly ensconced in a clean if not luxurious bed, which she was not to leave for some days to come.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"IT WAS JUST LIKE HIM!"

HERMIT GEORGE had not counted on keeping Aunt Pruny as a household appendage, and did not therefore look for her return. He and Canty went on in the old fashion. His trees were bending under loads of fruit slowly changing to green and gold. This year, if his grove did well, would give him the opportunity he had been longing for since his return to Florida, to visit the Old World.

He loved to sit in a little arbor built for the grand arms of a mighty scuppernong grape which reached to the very ridge-pole and then ran along a trellis forty feet in length, and from out the narrow opening look down the long, level lines of his trees.

It is interesting to study the effect this guarding and watching of orange-trees has upon persons of varying temperaments.

The cracker who has been poor all his life mellows so much under the influence of his grove just coming into bearing, that he has an

open heart and open house for all mankind. His table is free, his cigars — kept for company, the old cob pipe is his favorite — are free, and his tongue freest of all. He swells with his new importance, and talks of his consignees with the ease of a veteran planter.

The new-comer, on the contrary, is full of fears, and looks anxiously from day to day for signs of disaster or failure. He longs to strip every tree of its yellow globes. He is frightened at the least change in the weather, and devises gigantic schemes, which never come to anything, for the protection of whole acres from frost and the sun. He is not easy till every tree is stripped of its golden beauties and sent off under protest of his conscience, knowing that they needed weeks yet for ripening, and it would in the end profit him nothing to offer undergrown fruit to the Northern markets.

To these the old-time planters present a marked contrast. They scarcely look, think, or talk of their fruit, if they can help it, — unless they are anxious to sell. They are, many of them, sick of the sight of an orange. The machinery, once set in motion, is delegated to well-paid workmen, and all they care to do is to take in the receipts.

Hermit George was as yet a type of neither of these. Florida born, he could remember when

the whole settlement was under the sway of one masterly man, — that man his grandfather. The Hickson plantation was a goodly heritage then; but the war came, and his home was broken up, with those of many other old-time planters. The groves were burned, the houses demolished by time and neglect. His grandfather was dead, his mother was dead; very few of the once powerful family were living.

He had gone a mere youth to the gold-fields of Montana, and come back to find none of his kin surviving. Then he had bought this place, meaning to live in utter seclusion, with no one but the son of an old family slave to keep him company. The wild grove he had tamed, and it was now to reward him abundantly. If he could but tame his own wild passions as easily!

Here he had been content till this overmastering love of fair Estelle Ainsley had taken full possession of him, overpowering imagination and reason, making life at times a torture too terrible to be borne. At first he thought to stay and fight it out; but the more he tried to check it the stronger it grew, until finally he decided to become a wanderer from his home, exile himself in a far country, and leave his place, which he had learned to love, in the hands of an agent.

He was sitting there thinking these matters over, when a rapid gallop — too rapid for ordi-

nary travel — caught his ear. Standing up he could see a horse down the road, wildly racing, and the man on his back slowly slipping from the saddle, yet hanging on, his feet still above ground.

It took Barron but a second to comprehend that here was a runaway. Bareheaded as he was, he sprang toward the road, jumped the fence, wrenched the top-rail from the rest, held it in both hands, and stood in mid-road, holding the heavy wood on a level with his breast, right in the track of the frightened horse. The creature came on like a thunder-gust, snorting, wild-eyed, his long mane tossing. For one single second he paused, reared in mid-air; but in that second the rider had cut himself free, and as the horse started again and shied round the rail, the man fell with a loud thud to the ground, and the horse with a shrill cry leaped onward at the top of his speed.

Hermit George, throwing aside his implement of strategy, went at once to the relief of the prostrate man. Canty, comprehending the situation, came dancing out almost on his elbows, he was so excited.

"Go bring me the bottle on the top shelf in my closet," said his master.

"I 's subsidin', sah," said Canty, hurrying back.

A little brandy was forced through the tight-

ened lips, but the man's pallor increased, and he was unconscious.

"He struck his head on this stone," said Barron, pointing to a small cluster of white rock. "We must manage to take him in the house between us, Canty. Let down those rails; then come and bear a hand."

Carried by the two men, Russel Ainsley was taken into the hermit's habitation and placed upon a comfortable bed.

It was nearly an hour before he recovered full consciousness, and then it was found that he was unhurt, save the shock and the possible blow on the head, that had probably caused the stupor in which he had lain.

"I don't know how to thank you," young Ainsley said, in a weak voice, after he had risen and made sure that there were no contusions or broken bones. "As you stood there barring the road, it seemed to me that you were an angel sent from heaven. I could not have kept up much longer, and I dare not think what my fate would have been, dragged at the heels of that frightened horse. He is one I took on trial, and hardly broken yet, I fear."

"I saw from the first how to make my pose effectual," was the response. "A horse is very sensitive to a — what shall we call it? — tableau, provided the man knows how to stand still."

"That is, if he has the courage," said Russel, looking his admiration of the hermit, with whom he had never been in close proximity before.

"Your horse has probably gone home," said Barron.

"And I must go too. Stella and mother will be frightened to death," said Russel, springing to his feet, but falling back again in his chair from dizziness and exhaustion.

"It is well dinner is ready," said Barron. "You must wait till this faintness passes off; meantime I will send Canty over on my mare to reassure your — people."

He was on the point of saying "sister," but caught himself in time, though he turned away to hide the vivid color creeping up his cheeks.

So it chanced that Russel took his cup of coffee and bit of deer's meat sitting opposite the "outcast," as he had more than once called him; and after that he spent some moments inspecting his cabinet of curiosities, the few good pictures, the many ingenious devices in the way of furniture. His grove he pronounced the best cultured and finest he had yet seen. The garden pleased him. It was, he said, as flourishing as his sister Stella's, and flowers grew for her when they would not for others.

At home his verdict was, — "I don't see why that fellow keeps himself secluded as he does.

Upon my word, there 's hardly his peer in the city of New York for manly beauty, and everything about him speaks of elegance and refinement."

"I 'll tell you what 's the matter," spoke up Tom; "he has been disappointed in love. That 's the way they mostly act; but I 'd see women go hang before I would!"

"Wait till your time comes," said Kate.

"It has come," said fifteen-year-old Tom, laughing; "I 'm dead in love with you."

"He was dressed swell, too," Russel continued, —"fine white shirt, wristers, splendid cuff-buttons, and the least dust of a diamond in his shirt-front. If he had come out of a bandbox he could n't have looked neater. It seems as if the man did it simply because he knows the fitness of things, and he can't help it."

Kate looked over to Stella, who was putting some music away, but she gave no sign.

"He knows a bit about orange culture, too. I never saw a prettier grove than his, and the flowers in the garden look as if they came up for love, the same as Stella's do."

At this Stella flushed, and Kate caught her at it.

"Well, honey," she said, when she and Stella were alone, "the ice is broken; your fastidious brother is really going to take up the hermit."

"The hermit will be deeply grateful, no doubt," said Stella with averted glance.

"Next thing we shall have him coming here; and the next thing—"

Stella rose and left the room. She could hardly have told why she did, except that she had not had time to be grateful yet. Her heart swelled when she thought that to him, George Barron, of all men, they owed the life that was so dear to them.

"It was just like him!" she said in the silence of her room. "I should mark him as a hero among a thousand men;" and always after that, when alone by herself, she was doing him homage.

He on his part was rejoicing at the good fortune that had made him, should he choose to take advantage of the opportunity, a welcome sojourner under the Ainsley roof.

"And why should I not?" he cried bitterly, to himself. "Why am I such a coward that I dare not try a stake for fortune? The past — is it not dead and gone? Its very memory ought to be ashes by this time. It is the turning-point in my destiny; if I am strong now— But afterwards, when she has given her pure life in my keeping, how can I look in her innocent eyes without reading all my own criminal past? No! I'll not risk my own disgrace and her misery, for I

should be compelled to tell her the story of my life."

"Marse George," said Canty, breaking in upon his reverie after he had cleared the dishes away, sung three negro songs, and danced his shoes off, "did yo' take dat ar brandy in?"

"No," Barron made answer; "I left it in the middle of the road."

"It arn't thar," said Canty; "I leff it too, thinkin' nobody 'd come that a way; but it's gone."

It had gone — into Deacon Jones's pocket. That worthy coming from the next village with no results, having been sent for brandy, found the bottle half full in the middle of the road.

"Clar now," he said, as he tasted it, screwing up one eye, "dat 's de bes' I eber did taste. No moonshiners make dat ar. Ef 't was n't ardent sperits, I sh'd call dis a special providence, findin' it har, 'n' Aunt Pruny so powerful sick; but I specs de Lawd don' smile on sperits, even when it 's his saints needs it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"IT'S GWINE TER BE A HOWLER!"

ALL the signs presaged a storm at hand. The weather had been lowering for twenty-four hours. High winds and heavy rains were what the elaborate barometer in the possession of Hermit George indicated. Once or twice there had been lightning and rain, and a clear sky. There was no accounting for the freaks of the weather.

Hermit George watched the elemental strife calmly, sitting at the door of his modest mansion with his book and cigar.

The corn and fodder were under shelter, the rice and sugar-cane ready for the mill, everything that needed storage safely stowed away, and he was ready for storm or sunshine.

Since he had, according to all appearance, saved the life of young Ainsley, he had withdrawn more than ever from outside associations.

As it would have been in accordance with simple gratitude, he looked for a visit from Russel;

but the young man did not come. His fall had done him more injury than had been anticipated, and he was down with fever.

And if they had all acknowledged his kindness, what then? the man reasoned.

If Stella Ainsley had come herself, her sweet beauty enhanced by her modest bearing and the grateful heart she brought, how would that benefit him, or help him to an acknowledgment of his love for her? The bar between them was something that no amount of good-will or kindly feeling could remove. His cross must be borne forever; even love, the divinest, could not change it in this world. The law that made him what he was could never be repealed.

Canty stopped his antics long enough to look out of the window. The trees were bending all one way, as if held in some superhuman grasp, and the thunder pealed in one continuous roar. The mists born of the blinding rain gathered thicker between the columnar rows of pines, and a curtain of shadows seemed to unfold from their palm-like tops, and fall, full of a milky brightness, down the long trunks to the ground.

"It 's gwine ter be a howler, dis yer!" Canty said to the hermit, who never looked up from his book as he made brief reply, —

"Let it howl!"

Canty took three turns round the kitchen, first

holding his right foot by the toes with one hand, and then his left with the other, — a feat it had cost him hours of toil to accomplish, — his elfish eyes now and then scanning the horizon.

"Blim! blim! blum!" he muttered, as the thunder gave a low, monotonous growl, and a blinding sheet of lightning came after.

"I 's neber 'fra'd of nothin' but lightnin', and that fotches me," he said, as he looked out into the now thick gathered gloom.

Then the rain began, and presently, as the hermit said, it rained ducats, and he had all the pails and tubs the house afforded under the spouts. He liked water fresh from heaven.

The darkness spread like a huge pall. All the fine mists and soft colors dissolved, and there were only the roaring sound of the rain, the deafening bursts of thunder, and the lightning so white that it seemed to open the heavens to untold depths and cleave the black earth as with a scythe of living flame.

Canty, with an exclamation at every blinding flash, carried in his master's toast and coffee, opened a jar of strawberries, danced a hideous *can-can* illustrative partly of his fear, partly of his daring, and then drew up the solitary chair, after lighting two lamps to keep "de dazzle off," as he said, when there came a loud cry of, —

"Mind your dogs!"

The beasts, as if in response and defiance, began to bark and howl.

"Go see who it is, Canty; somebody belated and bewildered in the storm. A queer night for travellers."

Canty shook all over as he muttered between his teeth, "I 's subsidin', sah;" a phrase that with him answered all purposes for reply. "I 's never 'fra'd o' nothin' but lightnin', but that fotches me," he muttered.

He threw on an old waterproof helmet and went to the gate, not doubting but he should see the veritable Prince of Darkness himself.

There, in a drenched condition, both horse and rider, was Cracker Joe, his head bent low to avoid the wind-drifted rain, and dripping at every angle.

"I 'll hev to put up here for a time," said the man, as Canty opened the gate, kicking the yelping dogs on each side of him.

Cracker Joe rode in, and springing from the horse, landed on the porch, a human waterspout.

"Walk right in, sah," said Canty, after the man had shaken himself; he was making pantomimic motions silently behind Cracker Joe's back; "walk right in. Mr. C'rew, sah;" and with one grand flourish Canty shut the door on him.

George Barron had risen and now came for-

ward, book in hand. He had felt rather than experienced Cracker Joe's antipathy toward him, and he was conscious of a certain uneasiness in the presence of this man who had made himself a power in the place, tilling acres that had once been in a fair line of succession to himself.

"Sorry to intrude on ye sech a night as this, but I stood it all the way from the city, 'n' my horse is beat out, 'n' the wind almost blew my teeth down my throat. Besides, I hed a little matter o' business with you. 'Bliged ter ye;" for his host had offered him a chair.

"My wife 's sorter worried 'bout her nigger cook," he went on with characteristic bluntness, as he seated himself. "I thought mabby she hed come here."

"She has been," said Hermit George, "but she left on the night of the earthquake."

"That was a purty bad shock — 'spose you never felt a quake before?"

"Oh, yes, once or twice," said his host, smiling.

"Not in this country?"

"Not in this country," was the answer.

"Thought so;" and Cracker Joe changed his position uneasily.

"You don't know, I reckon, whar the critter has gone — the cook, I mean?" he said.

"I have no idea whatever," was the reply of his host.

"I 'm just taking my tea, or rather coffee," he added; "a cup of hot coffee won't come amiss in your damp condition."

"'Bliged ter ye," said Cracker Joe; "it 's a blizzardy night. Such a night as this out on the Plains, say, or round some o' them gold-diggin's, with Injuns figuring in the background, tryin' to get good aim at a fellow, would n't be so cheerful as this; would it, now?"

At mention of the Plains, the hermit started; an almost imperceptible motion it was, but it did not escape the keen eye of Cracker Joe, and he turned aside, ostensibly to put his hat down, really to smile and hide his shining white teeth.

The storm deepened in intensity. The rain-fall was like the solid beat of anvils, a great many at once.

"Did ye git much of a shakin' up, t' other night?" asked Joe, sipping his coffee with gusto. It was the best Mocha that could be procured for love or money.

"Well, my man thought so," said his host, smiling at the recollection of Canty's grotesque antics.

"I dare say; niggers are always looking for the day of jedgment. My man Croon went on his knees, and strung out a confession that ought to have hung him if the half wor true. That 's the only way you can get at the truth, when they

are frightened to death. This is mighty nice coffee, and a very comfortable way of takin' it. Just listen to that, will ye?"

The rain anvils beat and beat as if hammering the air itself into strange, fantastic shapes.

"This storm puts me in mind of a similar one I saw once in Montana. There wor a party of us: an old man, — not so old by years, but sort o' bent and grizzled by bad fortune 'n' hard work; well, I reckon there wor four: me 'n' my pard, old Richards and his little gal Luce — he always called her Luce. She was n't fourteen yit, but some girls is more womanly 't that age than some women is at twenty-six. Never saw such devotion in my life 's thet little one showed fer thet run-down old man. She watched him 'n she almost breathed fer him, 'n' she wor the prettiest creeter the good Lord ever created. Why, them eyes o' hern 'd see more in ten minutes than a hull congregation of city girls, they wor so large 'n' soft 'n' bright, — sort o' like two worlds with all that wisdom pressed into 'em. Well, we wobbled on, fer the stage wor a rickety old consarn, patched up like a worn-out shoe, 'n' about as leaky, 'n' Injins wor round powerful — scalped a party o' ten the week afore — Oh, Lord!"

There came just then the loudest crash of all, so heavy that it shook the house. One of the

great pines had fallen, to the terror of Canty, who had been dancing in and out through the passage-way between the living-room and the kitchen for the last ten minutes, and who now burst open the door, and with a loud cry fell prone on the threshold.

"Wha' de airthquake spar'd," he quivered, "dis yar storm 's gwine ter finish. Dat ar tree took de lef'-han' roof, suah 's yer bawn," he added, as amidst the laughter of the two men he rose crestfallen.

"You can clear the table, Canty," said George Barron; "and look out that I don't find you so near the door another time. It won't be good for you."

"I 's subsidin', sah," the negro replied, and quietly carried out the dishes.

Cracker Joe declined a cigar, but he took out his pipe, and the hermit lit his Havana.

"Mout 's well finish that little story, I reckon," said Cracker Joe, as he leaned an arm on the table. "No use goin' out in this wind-storm to see what damage is done — no great, I should say. Well, we fixed our claims 'n' built a shanty, 'n' I boarded with old Mr. Richards, 'n' I fell in love with little Luce. Look a here! you mout laugh to hear me tell o' my fallin' in love; but that little gal, — why, 't wus wuth a dozen operys to watch her move about that thar ole cabin, 'n'

hear her sing. So thoughtful! caring for everybody. Fell in love with her? Why, yes; if worshup is the thing they make out it is, then I wor 'n everlastin' worshupper. I jes loved everything that little girl tetched. I was jes on my heart's knees to her from the minnit I got up in the mornin' till I lay down at night. What I did, I did for her; what I thought, I thought for her. Well, I jes lived to see her smile, 'n' git a look out'n her bright eyes. Ever been in Montana?" he asked, bending his searching glance on the face beside him. . . .

A quick, nervous movement of the hermit's whole body, which subsided almost before one could note it; then he answered calmly, —

"Yes, I was once in Montana."

"I thought so; I know a travelled man, specially if he's been out West, the minnit I set eyes on him," was the reply.

"P'r'aps you know Wasp Nest Gulch," said Cracker Joe, after a short pause.

"Perhaps I do, and perhaps I don't," was the slow response; "why do you ask?"

"You said you'd been in Montana;" and the large, stern eyes were fixed almost threateningly on the face of his host.

"Yes, I said I had; and what if I know Wasp Nest Gulch?" the quiet, steady eyes never fell under the restless glance of Cracker Joe.

"Oh, nothin'; it does n't matter, one way or another — much. Some folks has a good deal o' human nater, and some profess to have a good deal of 'ligion; but most of 'em has more devil in 'em than anything else, that 's my experience. But then, I 've had niggers round me all my life — p'r'aps I ain't no jedge o' white folks. But I was thinkin'," continued Cracker Joe, "of them old times. There wor a chap there looked like you; well, a boy, mind, — a rash boy, — who never stopped to think when he was in temper or a hurry, 'n' hed too much to think of at his leisure. Well, we won't say 't was you, but *he* was there, — a boy, as I said, infernally handsome — well, the happiest, handsomest, pluckiest feller I ever see.

"I knew him, — knew him for the grandson of my biggest enemy, mind you; a man I hated, — oh, Lord, yes, as I hated the copperhead that gethered its poison off his land! I 'd growed up wild, unedicated, independent. My mother was good blood, but the blood hed growed thin, 'n' my father was a way low down cracker, sure 'nough, who kept pigs, 'n' lived in a shanty o' two rooms 'n' a slab-sided chimley. Chinks in the wall 'n' slab-sided chimleys has a good deal to answer fer in the makin' of a man's character sometimes, I take it. A man don't grow up smooth like he would in a house that hes some-

thin' in it 'cept four walls, 'n' them cracked 'n' splintered, 'n' there's nothin' ter take holt of — to think by — don't ye see?

"Don' know how it was, 'cept I wor such 'n independent little cuss; but old man Hickson — that's yer granther, 'n' you 'll allow he wor a tyrannical old gentleman — hated me off the face o' th' earth. I never met him but he swore at me; 'n' big 'ristocrat as he wor, with his hundreds o' slaves, he could say the hull alphabet of swear-words down to izzard, 'n' I 'd cuss back agen. Well, thet old man made me walk five miles round his plantation," — the narrator's teeth came together with latent hate, — "when I 'd 'a' cut off three goin' cross lots over his land, 'n' I hed to walk it too every day. Sir, I never forgive that man, 'n' I swore I never would; no, nor one of his kith 'n' kin, down to the last generation. 'N' I jes took a solemn swear thet I 'd not only go cross lots," he added, striking the table with his clenched fist, at the same time that a clap of thunder came, which gave a sort of diabolical reality to the scene, "but that I 'd own every acre he had and be —— to him. I ginerally say 'periwinkle,' on 'count of my wife," he added with ludicrous earnestness and a softer tone; "but talking of *him*, I jes sweat swear-words."

CHAPTER XXV.

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE SCAR?"

"EXCUSE me."

It was George Barron who spoke. He rose, went to the door and opened it. Great drops of sweat stood on his brow. Swirling rain and damp cool air came rushing in and moved his wet hair. He looked out, closed his lips more firmly, came back, took the heavy lamp from the table and set it on the bracket behind him, while Cracker Joe smoked with quick, sharp whiffs, as if laying in a store for the next paragraph.

"And I got it," said Cracker Joe, wholly absorbed by the narrative; he stretched his long legs outside the table, while he lay back in the heavy chair that cracked a little under his weight. "Them 'at waits longest fares best sometimes. I own every line of beggarly land that man ever set his foot on — paid fer it in good solid money; 'n' I 'm as rich as he was — yes, 'n' richer, 'n' ain't got no slaves to my name either."

Then followed a profound silence. The storm

had lulled. George Barron's face was ghastly as death.

"Well, the boy I spoke of came out to play at mining — did his part well. I've no fault to find; strong-limbed, stout-hearted, handsome as an angel, on'y I hated him because he was one of that — I say no more hard words. He was never sociable; they called him 'Gentleman George' in camp; he never came to Richards's cabin as the others did, but I heard he said something about *her* which raised Cain in me. It was done by an enemy of his, as I found afterwards; but that added to the other grievances made me hate him worse than before. I think the Devil had me then, and he kept whisperin' murder."

Hermit George drew a deep breath, broadened his shoulders, crossed his legs and thrust his hands into his pockets, — all these unusual movements showing how deeply he was touched. On his face was still the stony hue of death, in his eyes no speculation, in his soul, despair.

"Well, him 'n' me met one day, close on to night," resumed Cracker Joe; and at that moment a flash of belated lightning revealed to each the other's face, and Cracker Joe caught his breath, laid his pipe down, and pushed his chair back farther. He did not perhaps wish to see that face again.

"'T was up high in the mountings; awful

peaks, with jagged edges 'n' precipices, and rents between, that was made by the Devil ages ago. Jes then 'n' there we met, him 'n' me. I charged him with some things 'n' others, 'n' I got him tearin' mad. We went to work like two furies, fightin' for love 'n' hate, 'n' I was stuck; yes — he drove the blade right in here — "

"For God's sake!" cried George Barron; and what was in the voice — joy, anguish, fear, or all combined?

"He threw me over the edge of one of the worst cañons in all the State, — hundreds of feet to the bottom; 'n' if I 'd gone down there — well, God must 'a' seen how I longed for that girl, little Lucy, when I was cut, 'n' how I 'd been despised 'n' outraged 'n' crossed 'n' sort o' banished, 'n' He jes let me slide right in the forked stem of a big tree, that caught me like a mother would 'a' caught her baby, 'n' held me thar close; though p'r'aps I wor as good as dead, if one o' the friendly Indians had n't come thet way 'n' heard me moanin'. He went down and 'larmed the camp, 'n' I got out, and wor nursed back to life by my Lucy — thet 's all."

George Barron with a convulsive movement drew his chair up to a table at the side of the room, and laid his head on his hands with a sob that it was anguish to hear from a strong man, it was so deep, so resounding, so sorrowful.

Cracker Joe had risen. His face was benignant; he seemed almost to touch the ceiling as he straightened his gaunt figure.

"Would you like to see the scar?" he asked, in a voice so gentle that it was music itself. "All these seven years you hav' n't known me, for I took my mother's name when I came back here. In those minin' days I was beardless, thin, 'n' consumptive looking; thar 's a natural difference between twenty-nine 'n' forty, or thereabouts. All this time you 've had my death on yer conscience; 'n' kept from yer kind, all 'long o' me, who knew you, 'n' done worse than you did with that knife o' yourn, fer I gloried in yer suffering — yes, I did.

"But I know what forgiveness means now. My wife, — God bless her! — my little Lucy, she taught me, 'n' I 've buried my hate, 'fore God, 'n' you shall see that scar if yer want to, for proof of the truth of what I told ye."

"No! no! Oh, peace, peace at last, thank God! No!" and George Barron sprang from his recumbent posture and flung himself into the arms of Cracker Joe, and wept like a child on his bosom.

"Thar, thar!" said Joe, patting him as if he had been a child in reality; "let 's forgit 'n' be friends. We 're both crackers, you 'n' me, on'y you 're high up, 'n' I 'm — well, I 'm half-way low-

down. You 've hed advantages I never could git, but you 've hed to lay low, when a word from me any day these seven years would 'a' made ye hold yer head up. You 'll forgive me?"

"Forgive you — for what? for restoring innocence, and heaven, and every sweet joy a man can have in life? I thought, as you went on recalling those things, that you had come to convict me; yes, even further on, that this was to be the ultimatum of your hatred, — to denounce me as a criminal. That *you* were the man I met and — wounded, that night, I never dreamed till the last moment. Forgive you! ten thousand times!"

"One 's plenty, pard," said Cracker Joe, grimly. "I 've worked like a slave to git where I am, 'n' I 've worked my niggers hard enough, Heaven knows, but I reckon it 's because I wor under the lash of conscience myself. I shall be a better man after this, more worthy of my little Lucy;" and he wiped his eyes, and his cheeks, and even down his beard the tears were running.

The two men stood hand clasped in hand. Joe had said before that once the hermit was as handsome as an angel. Surely the peace and beauty of angelhood and heaven were on him now.

The moonlight came in, the sky was all starry peace; the storm, as Florida storms often do,

had ceased at once; the air was sweet, and the outlook, as the two men stood on the porch, beautiful beyond description.

"You 'll come and see us now," said Cracker Joe, clasping the other's hand with a fervent farewell pressure. "Lucy would like it."

And the other answered, "I will certainly come."

And when he was alone again George Barron fell on his knees and sobbed a broken prayer, which Canty hearing, having had his ear to the keyhole since the departure of Cracker Joe, set off on a series of shuffles that would have made his fortune in public.

"He 's done got it! De airthquake 'n' de storm, dey 's gib him a stirrin' yup, 'n' he 's done got 'ligion suah nuff!"

He did not see his employer go to the drawer in the top of his bureau and take out a knife, horn-handled, rusted, and blood-stained. Neither did he hear him as he whispered, "You will never journey with me, never haunt me again; God be thanked!"

Then he drove the knife-blade deep in the wooden table, so that the rusted blade broke in two, and then he said, low and fervently, "I am a free man once more!"

Cracker Joe went home to Lucy Cottage with the flower hearts'-ease in his bosom. Never

had the place looked so peaceful and beautiful, never had he felt so deeply the value of his great possessions; but of more worth than all was that spot upon whose black roof the moon shed her silver rays, and under which were the wife and children of his love. He too was a free man once more.

Lucy looked up from her sewing. Opposite her was a fair young girl of eighteen, slender and stately for her years, who called Cracker Joe father. She had but lately come home, and was not yet accustomed to the ways of the household, but she took to Lucy with a pretty earnestness and show of affection that made Mrs. Joe feel more matronly than ever, and was gentle and deferential toward her father, — though she trembled at the slaughter of the verbs and tenses whenever Joe was betrayed into a speech or tried to hold his own in an argument.

"Did you see him?" asked Mrs. Joe.

"I did. It's all settled, 'n' he's comin' up to call on the ladies," was Joe's emphatic reply. "Marie, you must set your cap for him; hard to find a handsomer man."

"Who is he?" asked Marie, after a gesture of dainty dissent.

"They call him Hermit George, because he stuck to home and minded his own business," said Joe, laughing. "He's comin' out, after

this; the Lord knows whether it will be better or worse for him."

"What about Aunt Pruny?" his wife asked.

"Off on a tramp, I reckon; taken to the woods. Hope it'll do her good. Them high-sperited niggers ought to live by themselves."

"You are talking about my old nurse?" asked Marie, smiling.

"Y–es," said Cracker Joe; and his wife gave an emphatic little nod.

"She was such a nice old soul! so good to me!" said the girl. "Is n't it strange, though, that, cared for as I was by an African woman, I should have such an antipathy to that sort of people?"

Cracker Joe went to look for his paper, his wife bent lower over her sewing, and little Miss Marie talked on, unconscious of the chords she had touched in her father's memories of the past.

"Most Southern girls think worlds of their old nurses; but I must confess I don't share in the delusion," she added, holding her work at arm's-length to make sure it was right.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I KNOW IT, 'CAUSE I 'VE SEEN MANDY."

AS soon as Aunt Pruny could stand, she called for a stout stick with which to commence her journey.

"You 'll not go dat a weak," said Mrs. Brown; "don't cost nothin', ter keep yo'—ain't got a gnat's appetite, yo' has n't."

"I 's got to *attone*, chile," said Aunt Pruny, with solemn emphasis.

"But dar 's gwine ter be a camp, 'n' a 'stracted meetin'; we wants yo', Aunt Pruny."

"De place dat knew me dar, neber 'll know me 'gin, chile, no mo', 'n' forever," was the slow, decided answer.

"But yo 's one ob de mudders in Isra'l," was the response.

"I 's one ob de weakes' chil'n now, chile; I done gone sold myse'f," she made reply.

They all plied her with arguments, but they did no good. Go she would and go she did, starting early in the morning.

"'T won't do no harm to make 'em think de thaurities is after dem," she muttered as she took

the road; "'n' then after I 's frightened 'em, I kin touch dar hearts, mabby. Ef I could on'y stop my Dick, de Lawd knows I 'd gin my ole life. I 's a sort o' Judas Discariot, anyhow; I 's bewrayed my master;" and a sob of anguish told what a conflict had been going on in her black bosom.

If she had but waited the day out, her fears would have been lulled and her self-sacrifice averted; for that same afternoon Mrs. Carew drove up to the Browns' log-cabin, with a pretty, high-bred looking girl, and inquired for Aunt Pruny, to learn that she had been gone all day, had "tuk de road" early in the morning.

"I hope she will come back," Marie said, settling the folds of her delicate muslin dress; "I should so like to see her. She took the whole charge of me after my mother died."

"Yes," said Joe's wife, reflectively, "she did."

"Papa told you all about it, I suppose," said Miss Marie. "I 'd a deal rather have had a white woman, for these black people are generally so utterly disagreeable; don't you think so?"

"Well, yes, perhaps — that is, some of them," said Joe's wife, turning away to hide an amused smile.

By this time Aunt Pruny had gone many miles, but now she began to look about her and take her bearings.

A thick growth of oak of the perennial kind, interspersed with majestic magnolias, seemed to offer a barricade to her eager exploration, and she moved slowly along like one seeking for a sign. Thickly grew the dogwood; the fennel and wire-grass were as high as a man's head. Now and then the golden balls of a wild orange-tree, or a few clusters of them, came in sight.

"Dar's oranges, but not dem oranges dat grows on de double trunk. I 'll know him soon 's I see him," she muttered, going on yet more slowly; "an' dar he is, sho'!"

At the base of a huge water-oak could be seen a depression that seemed to have been made by human feet, and leading from that, a trail of yellow brown that grew more decided as she went on.

Step by step she cautiously kept her way, till presently the scene changed from barren pine-land to a wealth of floral beauty unknown save in semi-tropical countries, — huge trees shattered by some terrible storm and covered with wild grape-vines running through the whole scale of color into patches of white, while the loveliest plants of air and earth gave their fragrance to complete the enchanting scene. From the limbs of mighty trees hung moss, blue, gray, and purple, the festoons draped with that inimitable grace which Nature achieves when left to its own sweet will. Over all there was a mist of the rarest, softest

coloring, like floating, intangible rainbows, as the sun, now nearing the horizon, shot through the interlacing branches and the weird folds of the moss a shaft of red fire. Now and then a bird chirped, and a ceaseless fluttering sounded overhead.

The beauty of the everglade grew brighter, more bewildering, as the woman trudged on, heart and head alive to all these wondrous pictures, though her soul was trembling within her. Only once before had she penetrated the secrets of this thicket, and had then been warned that a second attempt meant death.

While she plods along, we with freer steps will go on ahead till we come to a sink, lined from the far depths below to the top with pines, oaks, cypress, and gums. Here we find an open space, the ground well cleared, and several smoothly-cut stumps, obviously used for seats, stand round. A magnificent live-oak, whose shadow by exact measurement covers an acre, stands alone in its majesty, under which the woody floor spreads brown and rich up to irregular bushes, vines, and trees that hang over and half hide the mouth of a small cave, and near by one can hear the musical gurgle of water.

A cap on the ground, a coat hanging to the limb of a tree, now and then the sound of a negro air, now and then low voices, or the thud

of the axe, or a whistled melody, break the silence. Suddenly the air is permeated with a strong alcoholic odor. One cannot tell where it comes from, for the still is well hidden and guarded.

This is the manufacturing ground of the "sperits" that keep up the strength of Mrs. Dunn, and that are slowly destroying all there is left of manhood in Jim Dunn her husband.

"It 's all right, Jim!" and forthwith appears in sight, coming round by the cave, a negro with a head massive and splendid in contour, and features not unpleasing, though of African type. "The best day's work we 's done fer a y'ar," he went on, throwing off his woollen cap and opening still wider the capacious shirt that covered the great bones of his chest.

Jim Dunn came following, — a figure that scarcely ever stood upright, shuffling in gait, bowed in shoulders, — and finding his pipe, began smoking with his companion.

"You 'll be able to git that pooty gal o' yourn a silk suit *this* time," continued the negro. "It 'll be hard if we don't make a cool hundred or two apiece, this job."

"That gal o' mine ain't goin' to wear no silk suit, 'less they hev sich things in the place she 's goin' to. I 'll 'low ther' 's some place, fer

Mandy 's gone there," he drawled, looking about him with lack-lustre eyes; "I know it, 'cause I 've seen Mandy."

"Seen her! Where — here?" cried black Dick in an awe-struck voice.

"Yes, here — right clus to the still; 'n' I knew what it meant, too."

"What did it mean?" asked the other.

"Mandy was right agin this business," said the cracker, in his low, drawling tones, "'n' sometimes I 'm 'fra'd 't was the frettin' 'bout it as killed her. Wal, ef you want to know what I think, — *I* thinks business is up."

"How up?"

"Well, I dunno *how*, but I reckon this is the las' time we 'll ever still 'n this place. That gal seemed to say it, tho' she did n't speak a blessed word," he added in a lowered voice.

"'Umph! yo' dreamed it," said Black Dick, trembling.

"Say, when thet hickory bough come down yisterdy 'n' knocked yo' down, did you dream it? Hark! what 's that?"

Both men sprang to their feet.

"Dis way, ossifers! dis way!" cried a shrill voice. "Har 's de bery place; I knows all 'bout it; dis way, ossifers!"

Black Dick took aim and fired at a dark object between the pines. After listening, finding their

retreat undisturbed, the two men hurried toward the spot. A woman lay on her side, quite still. Dick looked down at the moveless figure, and then in tones of horror exclaimed, —

"My God! Jim, I 've killed my ole mother!"

"No business to be here," said the cracker, unmoved. "I 'd have shot my wife if she come."

The low ferocious voice, and the strength of it, accorded oddly with the loosely-built, shambling figure.

"But yer ole mother, Jim! dat 's worse 'n' a wife. Help me git her up; b'ar a hand, won't ye?"

"I never tetched a dead nigger, 'n' I never will," growled Jim, brutally.

Black Dick glared at him.

"I 'll lay yo' out ef yo' don't take car'," he muttered.

"I 's not dead, but I 's shot," said Aunt Pruny, slowly; "de Lawd hev mercy 'n' forgib yo', Dick."

"Did n't know 't war yo'," said Dick.

"Well, it 's de compensashun; I feel 's if I 's paid fer all," she added faintly.

"Hev yo' brought de officers har, mammy?" asked Dick, listening.

"I called 'em," muttered the woman, "but dey did n't come. You 'll hev ter stop dat ungodly

business, Dick, now it's killed yer pore ole mammy."

Dick had taken the limp body up in his powerful arms, and was bearing it toward the cave. Through a collection of boxes, barrels, and demijohns he carried her to a sort of bunk and laid her down. Then he stood off and looked at her.

"Does yer feel any pain, mammy? Will I git yer a little whiskey?"

The woman shook her head. "I would n't tetch it; I 'd die fust!"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Dick, "what 's I gwine to do? No doctor, 'n' no minister, 'n' de ole woman a dyin'."

"An' her on'y son a murderer," groaned Aunt Pruny; "killin' de sperit well as de body."

"Whar 'd I hit ye?" asked Dick. "S'pose I makes ye a poultice! Will hot water do? Whar d' ye feel it mos'?"

"In de lef' side, 'bout de middle ob de heart," gasped Aunt Pruny; "'n' spacially on de edge ob de right elbow."

"Yo' could n't feel it lef' 'n' right boff," said Dick. "One ball neber hits op'set places to onct. Le' me see de elber."

He carefully pulled up the loose sleeve. The ball had only grazed the flesh. There was no wound of any consequence.

"Dat 's nothin' but a scratch," said Dick, laughing. "Oh, Lord! I ain't shot my ole mammy, after all."

"Yo' 's hurt me in de heart, dough, boy; dar 's a woun' *dar*, I tells ye, 'n' I said right when I tole yo' de pain wor in de middle ob de heart. Dar 's a big wound *dar;* 't ain't no bullet, boy, but a chile's ungratitude dat make it ache."

"Well, I 's mighty glad ter see ye, anyways," said Dick. "Tell ye what — we 'll hef to keep ye har to cook fer us. Fact is," he added, "yo' 's here, 'n' yo' can't git away no mo'."

"Yo' 'll not keep me har; yo' can't keep der free sperit," said Aunt Pruny, with a tragic gesture. Now that she knew the wound was only a superficial one, she was waking up to the fact that she had had nothing to eat since morning.

"Yes, yo' 's got ter stay, mammy; I 's sorry to say it, but it 's one ob de rules ob de camp — we never 'lows nobody to go back ef dey once comes. Our rules is bery stringunt. We eider shoots um dead, or dey hes to take an oath to stay."

"Boy, I 's yo' mudder!" said Aunt Pruny, grandly, rising on one arm.

"Could n' holp it ef you wor de mudder ob de hull gang. Ebery one ob dem hef to obey de laws ob de camp."

"Yo' don' say yo' 's got any law here!" said Dick's mother, falling back limp and helpless.

"De stringiest, strongest kind," said Dick. "Dem who comes mus' stay, or go to de kin'-dom. Now, we won't hurt ye, mammy, 'n we needs a cook right bad. Yo' may hev all de freedom yo' wishes; yo' may call it camp-meetin' all de time, 'n' pray, 'n' convict us, ef yo' can. Ef yo' wants to do us good, ole lady, har 's yo' chance. Yo' can mix 'ligion wid yo' puddens, 'n' give us — well — Hail Columby long o' chicken stew. Rabbit 'n' roast 'possum 'll b'ar lots o' rastlin ober, 'n' coon soup — golly! I'd listen 'spectfully to a sarmon 'n hour long, 'f yo' 'll on'y let me eat while I 's repentin'. We 's got right smart o' gardin sarce out har, 'n' we buys our flour by de barr'l, 'n' dars no knowin' how soon yo' may make convicts out ob ebery one ob us. Lord, 't ain't wuth takin' time to think 'bout it, wid sech privleges to do good. Da 's a heap better 'n a bullet troo de heart, 'n' I 'm boun' by law to do it myse'f."

Aunt Pruny was thinking very hard. Was this a way out of her difficulties, provided against her will? Perhaps it was better to have all right of choice taken out of her hands. Some little good she might do here, — none in the world beyond. She believed she had lost her chances there forever.

"I dunno 's I kin do better," she said meditatively; "'n' ef I can't go, why, I can't. I likes to

cook, jes give me things ter do with; 'n' 'possum fat 's as good as butter for mos' shortenin'. 'Sides, you men don't know nothin' 'bout savin', 'n' side dishes, 'n' oyster pies; 'n' long 's I 've put myself outen sassiety, 'n' can't git back wid any show ob reason, 'n' ef I kin pray 'n' sing, why, I 'll try to do de best I kin, 'n' may be de Lawd 'll forgib me."

"Amen!" said Dick, like the sacrilegious scapegrace that he was. "Mammy, I 's boun' to see dat yo' has all de privleges yo' 's been conformed to; 'n' ef enybody interfares, I 'll shoot him, 'n' don' yo' forgit it."

And so Aunt Pruny, who had been considered a shining light among her own people for nearly half a century, fallen among thieves, had become the cook and confederate of a company of outlaws. She who had always moved with dignity in all the gatherings, where she was looked up to as a saint by virtue of her rude eloquence and her long experience, through one inadvertence had fallen so low that her worst enemy might pity her.

As the time passed she felt the degradation more and more. Sitting by herself in the glorious nights, the rich shadows of the underwold reaching to her feet, the wondrous masses of flower and foliage on every side, the deep, solemn sky above, the recollection of the past came

over her, and she remembered how she had swayed hundreds of souls for good, while here she was practically tongue-tied.

"Dey gives me no chance," she muttered sadly; "dey 's never gwine to give me no chance; 'n' how kin I sing 'n' pray when I knows I 's holpin 'em break de laws ob de land?"

In this way she mourned and grew heavy-hearted. She had cast in her lot with law-breakers, and so cut herself off from the honest of her kind.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE KING HAS COME!"

RUSSEL AINSLEY sat on the veranda of the old Fenn house for the first time since his convalescence. Rugs and chairs and tables gave the place an air of homelikeness and comfort.

Kate had been reading to him, but at Stella's call for help she had thrown down her book and rushed into the house, where she found her cousin struggling with a plate of tea-cakes in one hand and the teapot in the other, the latter on the point of coming to grief.

"I was just getting up a little lunch for Russel," said Stella, as Kate relieved her, "and undertook too much. Hark! somebody has come; and Russel seems so delighted! Well, the lunch will have to wait."

The two girls ran to the window, and through the movable blinds saw George Barron in the act of placing a chair beside the invalid, while Russel with a brilliant smile welcomed his guest.

"The king has come!" said Kate, softly.

"To his own?" whispered Stella, her sweet eyes shining.

"You know best," said Kate, shortly; and Stella drew back with a wildly beating heart.

Yes, this man, whatever his past had been, she felt at that moment was her king. So much his captive was she, that she would have gone unquestioning with him to the ends of the earth. Nobody but herself knew that her daily thought had been of him; that in her dreams she had seen him, always coming out from some dread misfortune with triumph for himself and shame for his traducers.

It was after George Barron — no longer Hermit George — had spoken to her father, and confided to him the story of his life, and she had had her first interview with him alone, with her father's permission, that Kate said one day, —

"I can't understand it."

"What can't you understand?" Stella asked.

The two girls were working some pretty tidies for a fair in aid of the church.

"This whole matter. It looks so — pardon me — stupid. There 's not a bit of romance about it from beginning to end, except that he put the diamond on your engagement finger. Instead of rescuing you from an untimely death, he saves your brother; there are no stolen meetings, no notes in mysterious hiding-places. You 're just a

commonplace young lady getting breakfasts and dinners (only you do sing and play splendidly), and no one suspects or has suspected (but me) that down deep in your heart's core you cherish the memory of a dark, handsome face, and that—"

She stopped, suddenly arrested by the entrance of young Chestnut, who stood spell-bound for a second as she looked in his face, a quick blush mantling her cheeks.

He had come to ask her to ride, and brought his new team; she must honor him by being the first to ride behind his handsome bays.

Kate said yes, and ran upstairs to get ready. Young Chestnut went out to have an eye to the horses, and Stella followed Kate.

"I wonder if there is any romance in this affair?" the latter asked, with a sly glance at her cousin. "He comes very often."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Kate.

"He's a fine fellow, and an only son," said Stella; "a Georgian, to boot. Just think of us girls settling down in Florida!"

"Thank you, I'm not settled yet!" said Kate, with unusual vehemence.

"You'll tell me, dear, when he proposes, won't you?"

Kate turned round with a whirl.

"Hold your tongue!" she said. "Of all ridiculous people, an engaged woman is the worst."

"Your grammar might be improved," said Stella, with provoking coolness; "you should have said 'most.' Fancy, 'worst ridiculous'!"

Kate laughed as she turned again to the mirror to finish pinning her veil.

"The idea of coming down to Florida to marry a cracker!" she said.

"But he's a Georgian!"

"I didn't mean him, you provoking thing!" snapped Kate.

"Oh!" and Stella lifted happy, shining eyes; "you meant my George, not your Georgian."

"How witty we are!" said Kate.

"It's enough to make one witty, to be so thoroughly happy. Mr. Chestnut is n't quite as handsome as —"

"He is handsome enough!" interrupted Kate. "If he was so superhumanly, angelically beautiful as some folks I know," she added ironically, "I should be awfully jealous every time any one looked at him — that's *me!*"

"Those horses are perfect," said Stella, looking out of the window.

"So is their master," said Kate, shortly, dealing Stella a little blow on the cheek with her glove; then almost taking her in her arms, to the detriment of her elaborately arranged veil, "My dear little goose of a cousin," she said, "I can't stand it any longer. I'll let you into a secret; you

are not the only happy girl in this country, Miss. Will and I have been engaged for two months!"

"Oh, Kate! so that's your idea of being romantic! You sly, sly puss! But I congratulate you with all my heart; and here comes my George on his splendid steed! Do you know I am going to have Byrnie? It is just the horse for a lady, he says."

"I 'll have a better," said Kate, saucily.

"You can't; Byrnie is an angel!"

"Ridiculous! Think of an angelic horse! Remember, Stell, I don't want this thing known till Will — Mr. Chestnut — sees papa, who will be here next week. So if you *can* hold your tongue — "

"'Of all ridiculous people,'" said Stella, "'an engaged woman is — '" She ran downstairs, and Kate after her. Kate turned toward the front door, where young Chestnut was waiting, while Stella, smiling, went into the living-room to meet George Barron.

The young man came forward, and now that the weight of the terrible burden which had rested on his very heart so long was removed, his speech, air, and tread gave evidence of his freedom.

There was a long hand-pressure; eye looked into eye, and thought answered to thought. They sat down together like two children, no fears of the future, no care for the present.

Strangely enough, and not strange either, for it happens often in every-day life between lovers, the conversation began on things familiar, yet remote from their present experience.

"We are going to lose one of our neighbors," he said.

"I had not heard of it," said Stella.

"Mrs. Beck is called home by the death of her husband; and I have just heard that the Knowltons have lost their fortune in a financial crisis in New York. Still, the latter is only a rumor."

"I 'm sorry for her," said Stella; "her house has been taken for debt, and that sickly boy will be obliged to support his wife and himself. She certainly has been — unfortunate, if the rumor should prove true."

"What beautiful work!" said George Barron, for Stella had resumed her square of canvas, — "such lovely colors! Is that what you call *crochet?*"

She laughed heartily at his man's ignorance of such delicate handiwork.

"Oh, no; this is Kensington stitch. Is n't it pretty, though?" and she held it up.

"Beautiful, radiant!"

Could he have meant the work? His eyes were riveted upon her blushing face.

"So beautiful, so radiant!" he went on, prisoning the hand that held the work, "that it seems

incredible I should be blessed by its bestowal on me."

It was so easy, near as they sat together, for her head to slide on to his shoulder; so sweet to whisper little tender nothings — But what is all this to the reader, who has gone through a like experience — perhaps more than once.

Suffice it to say that Paradise was not to be mentioned in the same breath with this glorified room and hour. And when, not long after that, Stella sat at the piano pouring out her soul in the most joyous melodies, her lover thought it was worth all he had suffered just to sit there and look and listen.

Everybody in the house let them severely alone. Of course an engaged young lady is a nuisance, however lovely and unselfish she may be, — always was, and always will be. Ordinary household habits must be changed in order to suit her convenience, and everybody must bow down to her, or to him. Her George or James, or whatever his name may be, must be consulted on all occasions, and make himself at home at all times; while nobody must complain if the best room is laid under tribute till the wee sma' hours of the morning, or wonder why they will be utterly oblivious of the world and all, when they are together.

"It is a very good family, my dear," Mr. Ains-

ley said to his wife, "or was; they are pretty nearly all gone now, — an old Southern family, used to be veritable princes, I am told; ruling their three or four hundred slaves, and sending cotton enough to the North to bring them in fifty thousand a year. That was before the war."

"And is he poor now?"

"A man who owns a good plantation, and a bearing grove of ten acres, can't be called poor, my dear. He has money out at interest, — left him by an uncle who died abroad, and is at all events well enough off to contemplate spending a winter in Europe."

"And take my Stella!" cried Mrs. Ainsley in a new fright.

"Of course he 'll take your Stella. Allow me to remind you that she is my Stella too. Did n't I take your mother's Stella?"

"Yes, but you did n't carry me off to Europe."

"Very good reason why, my dear. I could n't afford it; he can."

"I can't bear to think of it," said his wife, with a heavy sigh.

"Of course you can't; but, bless the child! it will be the realization of the wish of her life. She has been a good daughter; she deserves a good husband; and I must say I am in love with the man myself."

"I am *not*, then," said Mrs. Ainsley, with a little sniff. "She is all the girl we have."

"How are you going to help it, my dear love? She is following exactly in the footsteps of her mother, eh?"

"Oh, well, that was different!" replied Mrs. Ainsley, without the slightest show of reason; and to the very last she persisted that the case was very different, as many a mother has before her, and will again to the end of time.

George Barron went home on air; beloved, accepted, — ay, and honored by all the family at the Fenn house.

Canty watched him thoughtfully, and made up his mind to a line of action which no one but a grown-up child would have followed to execution.

The next morning Canty exerted his culinary genius to its utmost, and made some delicious waffles. The coffee was clear as amber, and the table set with unusual care; the napkins, glasses, silver, all immaculate.

Canty himself, charged with a great purpose, had donned his best white jacket and his patent cuffs, brushed his hair in three pyramids, and waited, contrary to his custom, after his master sat down.

"All right, Canty!" remarked Mr. Barron, as he lifted a waffle on the end of his fork. "I said

all right," he added blandly, but emphatically, as the man continued to turn his waiter over and over, first planting his toe into the floor, that he might wiggle it unseen.

"Yes, sah — I knows — I 's subsidin', sah; but I merely wished to be pomitted to ask a question, if so you 'll allow," said Canty, with the utmost humility.

"Well, ask away. What is it? Are you going to get married?"

"Oh, Lawd!" exclaimed Canty; and had his complexion allowed, he would have turned pale.

"No, 'ndeed, 'ndeed, Marse George! I has n't any colored specialty, t'ank ye; I on'y wanted to know ef — ef — you 's sperienced 'ligion?"

The man turned out his coffee in dead silence.

"Yo' knows, ef so, it 'll be a big happiness, 'n' we 's mo' knitted by de ties ob fr'en'ship dan eber we war befo';" and he was waxing more and more grandiloquent, when he was startled by a very unbrotherly demonstration, that ended his anxiety.

"Oh, come, boy, dry up!"

It was gravely and even courteously done, but admitted of no reply save the inevitable, "I 's subsidin', sah."

Crestfallen, Canty shuffled to the kitchen and sat down on the lower stair, with his head in his hands for a few sad moments. Then he rose,

quietly divested himself of his fine jacket, loosened his paper cuffs, and with a sigh donned his customary habiliments.

The deepest exhibition of grief that it was possible for him to make was the fact that he walked quietly across the kitchen floor without a single shuffle, and waited patiently for his master's call.

"I don't suppose the poor devil meant anything," muttered George, smiling to himself at the recollection of Canty's crestfallen appearance. "I don't wonder he thinks I have gone through some experience, — but I can't allow such familiarity."

He rang his bell.

"See here, Canty," he said, as the negro made his appearance, "what made you think I had experienced religion?"

"Well, sah," began Canty in a low voice, "I tuk notice thar wor an alteration — sort of —"

"Now, if you had asked me if I were in love, Canty, — going to be married, say — "

Canty looked at his smiling employer.

"By golly, Marse!" he said, with touching simplicity, "I mout 'a' knowed it."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"OH, MOTHER! LET ME ALONE!"

THE breakfast dishes were cleared away in the Dunn household, and Derry had swept the rough floor with the husk broom, which seemed almost more than she could manage.

Her two younger sisters were busy with the beds, in their listless, half-hearted way.

Mrs. Dunn — her youngest born sitting at her feet and leaning against her, too lazy to sit upright, his hands full of cotton-balls — used the dip in such a slow, weary way that it hardly seemed to compensate for the trouble she had taken to prepare it, notwithstanding she would probably have died of inanity but for that national restorative.

The genius of inactivity, if there is such a genius, presided over the Dunn establishment, and one day followed another with much the same cheerless monotony.

Derry, her task over, fell into a chair, rather than sat down. Her long silence at last roused her mother, who looked curiously over at the

girl, and seeing her sad, introverted vision, watched her a few seconds, then exclaimed sharply, —

"D'rinthy!"

The girl started, and came out of her trance or day-dream.

"What 's the matter of you, Derry? Yo' ain't goin' jes as Mandy did, be ye? I 'm afeared yo' ben eatin' dirt, you 're so pale 'n' speritless."

"I 've plenty to do with dirt 'thout eatin' it," said the girl, drawing a deep sigh.

"Ther, now you 're a sythin' agin! You 'll lose every drop o' blood out'n yo' heart ef you keep a goin' on sythin' that a way."

"If I thought that, I 'd sigh every hour — yes, every minute," said the girl, accompanying the words with a gesture of weariness, as she leaned far back in her chair and clasped her hands behind her head.

"D'rinthy, you *hev* ben clay-eatin'!" said her mother, her voice expressing the most intense mental anguish.

"I told yo' I had n't," the girl made spirited reply. "Do yo' think I 'd keep up such low-down habits? I s'pose I 've got tired, cotton-pickin'. I 'm tired of everything."

"Yo' never got tired of it afore," said her mother, now rising to put a crooked stick of wood under the kettle, in which beans and pork were

boiling together. "Yo' know yer father 'll gin ye a new dress, 'n' let yo' take lessons, ef he hes good luck."

"What do I want of a new dress, or lessons, or anything? Oh, mother! let me alone!" And springing to her feet she ran between the ragged curtains, drove her sisters out, and threw herself on the bed.

"Mammy, Derry 's awful cross-tempered," said Cynthia, the sister next to Derintha. "She 's as ugly as if she wor somebody; 'n' now she 's jes a cryin' 'n' a cryin'."

Mrs. Dunn rocked her rockerless chair back and forth, shook her heavy head, — from which hung her dilapidated sun-bonnet, now half divested of the ruffle that once formed its chief ornament, and whose shreds dangled over her left shoulder, — and dipped vigorously.

"I dono 's I kin help it, gals; she ain't a mite like Mandy, — that gal ain't. We lost everything when we lost Mandy."

Meantime poor Derry was writhing and sobbing on her bed. Hers was one of those intense natures that defeat only stimulates. It was like a flame that water has no power to quench.

Since the night of the camp-meeting, when she saw in George Barron's eyes what he felt for Stella Ainsley, how he watched her retreating figure and had no word for her — Derry — the aimless

manner in which he turned, bidding her no good-night, and the expression almost of despair in his face, she had felt her hold on life loosen.

Battle bravely with her sorrow as she might, there was no surcease, and she was dying slowly of blighted love and hope, — literally dying. One could see it in her eyes, that had an unnatural lustre; in her cheeks, on which her struggle had left blood-red spots that the heedless people about her mistook for signs of rude health.

The only comfort she had was in going to Mrs. Carew; and even that had been denied her for several weeks, one of the youngest Dunns having had the measles. That angel of a woman had always some sweet soothing word for her, petted her, gave her pretty things such as delight the heart of the average young girl, and confided to her artless little secrets concerning the children and the home. So when Derry's situation was so intolerable that it seemed to her she could not live, breathe, think, another moment, she would throw something over head and shoulders and walk the forty acres between them, or else catch Ben, the old mule, and jog over on his back.

Now she lay there on the coarse flock-bed, her hands tightly clenched, as she prayed to die but could not. Her eyes burned, her lips felt parched, her heart ached. Suddenly, when all heaven and earth seemed to crush her with one great pang,

she sprang from the bed, threw on her head and shoulders a pretty knit shawl given her by Joe's wife, and making herself as presentable as possible, washing her sad eyes and her hot mouth, she bent her steps toward Lucy Cottage, unaware that a new inmate had come, — possibly to dispute her right to the affection of her dearest friend.

All around her, from the moment she turned the stile at the side of the great barred gate, were signs of prosperity. Large-eyed cows browsed on either hand; goats looked warily from some bit of rising ground or cluster of bushes, with their kids at their sides; lambs dotted the bright crab-grass; ducks, hens and chickens, turkeys with their young, fluttering doves, native pigeons, myriads of quail, — all in themselves studies for the artist's pencil, but entirely unheeded by the sad-eyed girl who moved automatically toward the strange old house that looked almost venerable enough to count its years by the hundreds.

And yet it was picturesque, massed in brown amid the pale gold of the oranges, the green of the pines and magnolias that grew on every side. Chairs and tables, a swing, three or four hammocks, a sewing-machine, and several pretty rugs were disposed about its wide, black-floored veranda. Beyond, one's glance ranged over tea-bushes, seringas, roses, the white and pink flowering cacti, cape myrtle in all shades of pink, two enormous

century-plants; over the children in fresh white dresses and straw hats making a feast under the thick branches of a huge mulberry-tree, setting out their toy tea-table with dishes, and every now and then running to mother to solve some riddle or help them out in their fun.

Cracker Joe had just dismounted from his favorite mare, — the queen of his stables, he called her. On his shoulder was his red and yellow Mexican saddle. He greeted the girl in his hearty fashion, and there was a more than passing interest in the look he gave her as she mounted the steps to the house.

"Something bad in the blood," he muttered. "She seems to be going like the other girl."

"They all look so happy here!" sobbed Derry to herself; and then, trying to be brave, she put on a smile that was born of desperation, and slowly opened the door.

Cracker Joe's wife, blooming and smiling as usual, was just coming from the kitchen, a plate of crisp cakes in her hand.

Her face brightened at sight of Derry.

"You're just in time," she said. "Sit right down and taste these goodies; I made them extra nice. You can't think how I miss Aunt Pruny, though. Let me tell you a good 'quake' story; I've just heard it," she added, sitting down. "You know our man Croon is quite intelligent, —

reads and writes. Well, he wanted to read about the earthquake, so went to Joe for a paper. Joe is full of his tricks, and gave poor Croon a German weekly. Croon put on his big glasses and sat down to read. The cook told me how first he looked outside, then inside, then upside down, and gazing at it in amazement exclaimed, 'Well, dat ar beats all! 'Fore de Lawd! ef dat ar 'arthquake has n't done gone 'n' mixed all de types so 't I can't tell toder from which!'"

Derry smiled; then for the first time Cracker Joe's wife seemed to notice that something was amiss.

"What's the matter, child? You don't look well," she said.

"I'm a little tired," Derry made answer; "we 'n pulled all the cotton, you know."

"Too bad for you to do that. Pity you could n't have turned it over to the niggers; but they're busy on their own patches. Well, never mind, you 'll spend a good long day with me; and I've got some of the strangest, most delightful news to tell you, for we've found a new daughter!

"Yes," she went on, answering Derry's gesture of surprise, "a beautiful girl, near your age, with a splendid education, — a daughter of my Joe by his first marriage. You never heard of that, did you?"

"Never!" said Derry, consternation in her voice.

"No, of course not; it happened long ago, and very few knew of it. He was poor then, you see, — poor, and you might say low down, for his folks were not exactly society people," she added, laughing. "Well, his wife died, and in course of time this little girl was sent to school; and Joe got rich, so he kept her there."

"And — I don't understand," said Derry.

"No, of course not," said Mrs. Carew, with a charming air of confidence, as if imparting what she had known for years but had not chosen to disclose; "we thought we would say nothing about her till Marie had finished her education. And now she is here, upstairs. Bless you! she takes her nap every day like a lady. Don't you congratulate me? She will be so much company —such a help to me! I'm going to show you her picture."

Derry sat like one stunned during this voluble outburst. It seemed to her that her own misery was culminating. Poor and ignorant as she was herself, she had been of some importance to Mrs. Carew. Joe's wife had confided in her, interested herself in her home experience, been of incalculable benefit to her in the way of little social matters and aids to personal adornment; now she was to be replaced by a really beautiful,

accomplished, educated young girl, to whom she, Derry, would seem a nobody, in whose ideas she would be unable to participate, and who would be so much to Mrs. Carew that the dear woman would never miss the girl she had taken up out of pure pity.

The photograph was next brought to her notice, together with some letters, charmingly written, addressed to her new mother, and which little Mrs. Carew read with great pride and much emphasis.

"Is n't she lovely?" asked the admiring woman, looking over Derry's shoulder.

Yes, unmistakably lovely to Derry's comprehension, with that high-bred pose of head and hands, the soft, spirituelle expression, the lustrous eyes, the sensitive lips, and the crown of beautiful hair.

Derry dropped the picture into the outstretched hands of Cracker Joe's wife, as if it scorched her. It did. The fire of jealousy had crept into her heart and burned in her eyes.

"I 'm so glad you 'll have some one to love!" she said, as if all conditions, all experiences centred in that word. "Some people are born to be good and happy; everything comes to them; and others — oh! they, the low-down ones, miss all the glory and beauty of life, and die — like — like my poor sister Mandy," she finished with a great, deep, dry sob.

"Why, Derry!" said little Mrs. Joe, wondering and startled. "Why, Derry!"

"Oh, it's no matter about me!" said the girl, with a slightly hysterical laugh. "I shall go soon, 'n' I s'pose they 'll put me 'side o' Mandy in that horrible place where the graves are full of water. It's a nice thing to die and be drowned!"

"You wicked child!" said Mrs. Joe, all glowing and grieving; "what has got into you?" She dimly divined the latent jealousy that spoke through face and manner. "You know I think the world of you, and it seemed to me so nice for you as well as me to know and love this young girl; we all need to be improved — I 'm sure I do."

"Yes," said Derry, wearily, — brain, heart, and body one dull ache, — "yes, I need it, but it 's no good for me now. You must n't look at me so when I talk of dying; for, Mrs. Carew, it 's got to come."

"What 's got to come? What is the matter with you, child?" asked Cracker Joe's wife, as the girl stood silent, the tears gathering on her lashes.

"My death. I *am* dying, Mrs. Carew. Can't you see it? What have I got to live for? Father is going agenst the law; mother — well, we have full 'n' plenty of whiskey and tobacco in the

house, if we hav' n't anything else. Oh, we 're all in a bad way, — low-down crackers, — and who cares? "

"See here, Derry," said Mrs. Carew, pained at this recital, and feeling its force and the truth of every word the girl spoke, "I care! You are getting nervous and low-spirited; it won't do for you to stay at home so much. The sickness and confinement have been too much for you. Come here and spend a month, and get acquainted with our new daughter. You shall have all the work you can do, and I will pay you well. It will do you lots of good; come. I 'm sure your mother will be willing, and you 're so handy with your needle."

"Oh, mother would n't care," said the girl, wearily. "Maybe I 'll come; but I won't promise."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"I 'VE DONE TRYING."

"MRS. CAREW, that gen'l'm'n as lives by hissef, he 's a gittin off 'n his hoss at the gate; Hermit George they calls him."

It was Minty, the young woman who had taken Aunt Pruny's place, who gave the information.

Then Mrs. Carew had a revelation.

With a low cry, so full of heartbreak and agony that it frightened the little wife of Cracker Joe, Derry caught up her shawl, and turning white to the lips, ran into the kitchen, out of the back door, and home through the woods.

"She loves him!"

That was all the pitying woman found time to say before she turned to greet George Barron, who, sparkling, rejuvenated, a curious halo seeming to shine out of the whole man, put forth his hand in graceful, hearty greeting.

Down the long path between the orange-trees Mrs. Joe caught a glimpse of Derry's flying figure; then she looked in the splendid face before

her, and her heart beat faster in pity for the poor unhappy child.

"Joe — my husband — says you were an acquaintance of his before we were married," she said, thinking all the while of Derry, who had sat where he stood.

Meantime Derry ran on till she reached home, breathless, despairing, ready for any reckless deed.

"If I was n't dying as fast as I can, I 'd kill myself," she panted, throwing herself on the bed. "I might have known I had n't the strength to go up there; and then to hear of all their happiness, and he to come just then! Oh, I 'd 'a' given my life just to look at him, but I did n't *dare*. What will *she* think of me?" She caught her breath and broke down, sobbing.

The work during cotton-picking, her carelessness in exposing herself to all sorts of weather, her unrequited love, had done their deadly will. Derry, with a constitution weakened by parental irregularities and inadequate food, was, as she had declared to Cracker Joe's wife, dying as fast as she could.

Day after day she declined, until, as it had been in the case of her sister, the big, best bedstead was brought into the middle of the cabin that the poor girl might have light and air in plenty.

It was a noisome and noisy place; but Derry suffered very patiently, and in their way they were all kind to her.

Mrs. Dunn resigned herself, and smoked and dipped; the father was seldom at home.

One day Derry waked out of a sound sleep. Her beautiful eyes had a light in them beyond the light of the natural sense, and her mother, who sat at the foot of the bed wrestling with a half-worn-out pair of stockings, lifted herself and came to the girl.

"What ye wantin', dear?" she asked with her usual drawling intonation.

"I think if you 'd get me pen and paper, mammy, I 'd like to write something."

"Thar ain't no pen but thet old goose-quill that your father mends with his razor," her mother said.

"That 'll do," said Derry; "give it to me," she added eagerly, her mind full of the purpose that lent her a transient vigor.

Her mother brought her the quill and a bottle marked "Paregoric," but which nevertheless was half full of a liquid called ink, manipulated from the berries of the sumach, and which was a dull red brown.

Then she bolstered Derry up on the pillows, and the girl with a trembling hand wrote the following: —

To Mr. George Barron.

Dear Sir, — As I am very sick and can't last long, I make bold to ask you if you have a spare picture of yourself which you will send me, — which will be a comfort to me to keep forever and forever.

Faithfully yours,

Derintha Dunn.

This she folded and addressed, hardly conscious of the warm tears plashing from her eyes; and calling her little brother Wash, who was still a favorite of Barron's, she bade him go quickly and give it to him.

"Into his own hand, remember, Bud. Don't let Canty or any one else have it; now, mind. Poor sick sister would feel so bad if you did n't do as she tells you!"

"I 'll be dead sure!" and the boy crossed his throat and over his heart in token of his sincerity.

Then Mrs. Carew came in with a bundle, and following her Marie, her delicate nostrils sniffing the strong aroma of smoke and onions, and her face expressing the dissatisfaction she felt in being compelled to wait upon these low-down whites; for Marie was of the earth, earthy.

The bundle, opened, proved to be two or three exquisite white sacques beautifully embroidered, not old, yet soft and comfortable. The basket Marie brought was filled with delicacies, with

which Mrs. Carew supplied Derry from her own larder.

"I 'm going to put one of these on now," she said, suiting the action to the word. "You look so bright and sweet this morning! There!" adjusting the pretty lace ruffle at the throat, and smoothing out the soft, broad pillow which she had made and trimmed herself for Derry's comfort. "Now, if you could only see yourself! There 's such a pretty color in your cheeks! Marie, bring me that bit of glass from the wall."

Marie brought and placed the triangular piece of broken mirror in Derry's hand. The girl smiled, and her great liquid eyes, with the tears very near their surface, surveyed the dainty puffing and edging, and the little bunch of white and red roses, with a geranium leaf, that Cracker Joe's wife had fastened at her throat.

"Dear knows I try to keep her clean," said Mrs. Dunn, in her slow, pathetic voice; "but the money I 'lowed to go in dresses hed to be spent in doctor's stuff, though 't don't seem to do her a bit of good, she 's so powerful weak. Ain't got no *good* strength, nither her father hain't afore her, nither me;" and the woman, whose breath smelt of whiskey, wiped her eyes vigorously on the stocking she had been mending.

"She looks very nicely always, Mrs. Dunn,"

said Cracker Joe's wife, smoothing down the ruffles over the thin, almost transparent hand. Then she bent lower as she said, "You must make haste and get well, Derry; I want you."

"Oh, Mrs. Carew, you know that can't be," said Derry.

"But if you try very hard, my dear!"

"No use," said Derry, with a little sigh.

Mrs. Dunn had gone out at a cry of one of the children that the pig was loose.

"I've done trying," Derry went on, "and I'd rather go; I want to go. I've told you all about it," she added, with a quick sob; "don't you see I couldn't live, and somebody else in his heart — in his arms?"

Then she imparted the fact that she had sent to him for his picture. Mrs. Carew looked a little frightened.

"Did I do right?" whispered the girl. "Say no, if you think not; I won't mind. I wouldn't mind anything if I could only see him; but I never shall — in this life; so I want his picture."

Mrs. Carew listened silently.. Her sensitive, more spiritual nature revolted against this to her needless show of sentiment. Like all women of delicate perceptions, she would have died and made no sign; but poor little Derry had no code of action but that which grew out of her overwhelming love, and Cracker Joe's wife pitied her

so, lying there in her youth and beauty, doomed to the grave before life had given her any of its sweetest gifts.

Little Wash came in, breathless.

"I give it to him with my own hands. Said he did n't know you wor so sick; comin' hisself!"

Mrs. Carew sprang to her feet, and Derry's face crimsoned, then grew deadly pale. Her great eyes dilated, and into them came a light that was not of earth.

"Coming — himself!" she whispered, and fumbled at her neck, her wrists.

"You look as sweet as you can," whispered Cracker Joe's wife, and bent down and kissed her.

Then with a full heart, and desiring to avoid the sight of their meeting, she called Marie, who had been calmly reading the book she had brought with her, and going out met George Barron as he turned the corner of the house.

"I 'm so glad you came! the poor little thing!" was all she could manage to articulate, and then hurried on.

"The idea!" said Marie; and her expression told the rest.

"He 's a good man!" said Mrs. Carew with unwonted energy. Then she went on faster to her carriage, which stood outside the zigzag fence;

through the misty eyes there were half a dozen carriages.

George Barron went in at the open door. He hardly looked at the poverty-stricken room; he could only see poor little Derry, with death in her face. He drew a chair up and took her white, wasted little hand in his. A great, manly pity swelled his heart; he hardly thought of himself in connection with this scene so sweetly solemn. Derry had come very near to his realization of what a spirit might be.

"My child!" he said softly, and smiled, as one would say, "Oh, the pity of it!"

"Did you — think it *very* strange that — I sent?" she asked, with lowered eyelids.

"I thought — that you did me honor," he said in his softest tones, after a slight pause. "And I thank you for that frankness which shows that you put faith in me."

All this while her great luminous eyes were drinking in the beauty of his face, doubly intensified by the gentle sorrow that irradiated every feature.

All her feeling was that he was good, so good! — good as the dear Lord himself — to come to this poor place and see her in her hours of suffering. She felt already exalted, as though death were past, and that for the time he belonged to her.

"I have two pictures," he said, as Mrs. Dunn, struck speechless at sight of him, stood irresolute on the threshold. "One of them was taken years ago — the other, lately. They are both considered good. You shall have which pleases you most."

"Oh!" Derry's eyes scintillated, and brightened, and darkened. The pictures were both miniatures, in pretty gold cases.

"This one," he said, "was painted for my mother when I went away," pointing to the most youthful presentment. "This one I had copied, and made more in keeping with my age. You like that best?" he smiled.

"It is you, yourself! I never will forget your blessed kindness. I 'll think of it in heaven; wherever I go, I 'll never forget," she added with large emphasis. "And may I really keep this? It is very beautiful; did n't it cost a heap of money? May I keep it?"

"Certainly you may," he made answer.

"Forever! I mean — forever! to carry with me, you know. It seems such a pity — to bury it; but that 's what I want it for."

She looked up at him. His lips were trembling. He turned away. Then he rose and moved to the unshuttered window and wiped his eyes. She did not see that.

It seemed as if he could hardly control himself,

the pity was so great, — this brief vision of the end of all that now delicate beauty vanished from earth forever.

When he returned to her bedside he was very calm and grave.

"You shall keep the picture, and do what pleases you with it," he said. "But, dear child, you need not die. Try to live; there is much in life for you to enjoy."

"You do not know," she said in a solemn voice. "Wish me well, and you will wish me to go. But I do thank you — you will never know how much. Good-by!"

He took her hand; the impulse seized him, and he bent over her, leaving a fervent kiss on the delicate brow.

She never spoke, only smiled, and her eyes grew more and more like stars as they followed him out of the room.

When he was gone, all the pallor of death returned. She gazed from time to time at the picture, always with a rapt smile and a great content, and then put it next her heart. Then she made a little will and testament. The picture was to be buried with her, just as she had covered it, with a bit of soft blotting-paper.

The next morning they found her dead, with a smile on her lips.

She looked as though at the supreme moment some transport had seized her, and she had died of joy.

Her hand was pressed over her heart. In it was the locket, and it was buried with her.

CHAPTER XXX.

"I'M GOIN' TO GIT OUTEN IT."

THE casks and barrels with their illicit contents were all in readiness for transportation. Two heavily-built horses browsed among the tall grass at a little distance from the cave.

The night chosen for their purpose by Black Dick's men was one of the darkest. In an almost inky sky the stars, near and remote, glittered like fine diamonds.

In the vicinity of the cave two large fires of fat pine sent up showers of short-lived splendor on the evening air, painting the swarthy faces of white and black alike a blood-red hue. The fireflies brightened the dimly-outlined foliage near by, and the crimson trunks of pine and oak seemed lengthening into vast cathedral aisles. Aunt Pruny, inside the little cave, to which she had added, woman like, a few touches that gave it a homelike air, had finished her tea, and was washing up the dishes. It had been a busy day with her, as the hamper filled with cooked food mutely testified. Two candles gave a dull glimmer to her immediate vicinity. The fire had

gone down in the big stove, pans and trays stood here and there, and Aunt Pruny in her dark calico dress and huge gunny-bag, which did duty for an apron, looked not unpicturesque as she flitted from shadow to candlelight.

"The boys," as she called them, were to start by four o'clock in the morning, some in the wagon, others on horseback, going diverging ways, but meeting at a certain rendezvous.

Aunt Pruny looked forward to a day of utter rest. After her work was done she sat down on a rudely improvised bench, her hands on her knees, and gazed long and sadly at the mouth of the cave that let in a little of the bright of the merry camp outside.

Presently a shadow darkened the opening.

"Dat you, Dick?" asked Pruny. She had grown thin; her large eyes looked out of hollow sockets, and were more brilliant than usual; her voice had a tired sound.

"Yes, it 's I, suah," was the reply. "Seems 's if I did n't car' to go to-morrer," he said, standing there before her, his shapely figure well defined against the outer light, but his face in shadow.

"It 's bad business, boy!" was the bitter response. Aunt Pruny sat with her elbow on her knee, her chin in the hollow of her hand.

"I know, mammy; I 'm goin' to git outen it."

"Be ye in airnest, Dick?" and her face changed. "Ef yo' ar, I'll bless de good Lawd ever I come har. I 's prayed fo' ye lively, boy, lively. Was n't nothin' else to do *but* dat."

"Well, good-by, mammy; yo' 's bin a good mudder to a bad son."

"Yo' 's not a goin' now?"

"No, but we 'll start in de 'arly mornin', 'fore yo' 's up, 'n' it 's still 'n' dark. I 'd like to jes gin yo' a kiss like I did when I wor a boy, ef yo' don't mind," he added, stooping awkwardly.

She threw her arms about his neck, and then, rising, strained him to her bosom.

"Yo' 's all I 's got; good-by," she said.

The man tried to speak but could not, only gave one or two short gasps and half backed away, then turned and hurried out of the cave.

Not long after the hour they had fixed upon for going, a *posse* of officers with dark-lanterns and armed to the teeth were upon them. The men, just started on their journey, fought like demons, but were finally overpowered, with one exception. Black Dick, fighting hand to hand with a stalwart official, held his own, though his assailant backed him step by step into the wood behind the cave. The contrabandist had met his match; for though both were powerful men, Dick's white antagonist possessed the knowledge

of a skilled pugilist. The weapons of both had been used without any visible result, and now they fought for supremacy with mere brute strength. Some moments elapsed, and the white man came back from the wood alone, pale as death, and bearing the marks of the deadly fray in face and person.

The gang were conquered at last, and Aunt Pruny, being a heavy sleeper, was not awakened by the noise of the encounter. She rose as usual in the morning, prepared and ate her solitary breakfast, put the place in order, threw water on the yet burning coals, arranged her garments in a holiday fashion, lifted her stout stick, and went out into the open.

How beautiful it was in the soft gray hush of morning! The sun sent one solitary streak of red light athwart the space in front of the cave, piercing the deep green heart of the mighty water-oak, lining every leaf in its path with gold. A cool west wind blew steadily; the sky was heavenly in its pale-blue, luminous beauty, with here and there a cluster of white clouds forming fantastic figures, and changing from one graceful shape to another almost quicker than the eye could take them in.

She looked over the immediate vicinity with a shudder. All the space so swarming with life the day before seemed weirdly still. Here and there

lay wisps of straw, broken bottles, tin cans, old newspapers, and stray pieces of clothing.

"They can cl'ar up thar litter when they comes back," she muttered. "I 's got a free day, 'n' 't ain't but fer a little; le' me go."

She plunged at once into the deep woods, now cool with the morning wind and showing the splendid tints of the hummock, every color brightening and deepening as the sun came up. Here was a dell fit for the fairies, with its couches and furniture of moss, and starred underfoot with a carpet of white and yellow flowers; there an ancient oak, up which wild vines went creeping and clinging, hanging out purple tendrils and meeting the wonderful curtains of blue moss that hid their further progress. Splendid butterflies, green and gold, and crimson and black, fluttered round her head. Beautiful birds flitted from branch to branch, singing as they flew. It seemed to Aunt Pruny as if she ought to sing too, and all at once she broke out; her voice, remarkable for its strength and purity, floated high in air, in a singularly wild refrain that no white person could hope to imitate, and rang clarion-like among the very tops of the trees: —

"I 's in great trubble, Lawd,
Oh, don't yer forgit me!
My heart is in tears,
An' my soul is in mournin',
Oh, don't yer forgit me, sweet Jesus!"

The very trees seemed to listen, and wilder and more shrill, more plaintive, more soul-burdened, grew the grief in her voice.

Then she came to a curious sink bordered with ferns and wild plants of every description native to Florida. Some two feet below the surface there was water, — a wide, deep, black pool, — and there Aunt Pruny rested. Making a cup of a broad oak-leaf, she drank to quench her thirst.

"Seems 's if somebody kep' a callin' me," she muttered, — "a callin' 'n' a callin'. Dar it is agen, — 'Mammy, mammy!' De win' blows it in my ear. Whar 's my pore boy? He ain't all bad, dear Lawd, 'n' I ain't got no other. Don' lef him out o' de kingdom, Lawd!"

She looked down into the dark, shining water.

"Dear heart! how nice 'n' rested it looks down dar!" she sighed. "Don't bleeve de Marster would scold ef I jes jumped in 'n' put 'n end to all my triles."

She put her hands to her head and staggered away.

"It 's jes a temptation, chile," she murmured. "Sing! sing louder! sing up ter heaven! keep singin' till de debbil gits yo' behind me Satan!"

Again the wonderful voice rang forth, clearer and sweeter; and during the day, whenever the dark thought assailed her, she would sing and

shout, and simulate the joy and ecstasy she did not feel.

Long before the sun went down she retraced her steps, and sadly and slowly made for home.

"Dey 'll all be dar a cryin' out fer dar supper; but dey 'll hev to wait tell I come, 'n' I sha' n't hurry."

When she reached the enclosure all remained as at the time she had left it, — no singing, playing, swearing, gaming; it was as silent as the grave. An old hat decorated a thorn-bush, a strap lay at the foot of a persimmon-tree. No foot had stirred the dead oak-leaves in the path that day.

Pruny stood still, like one petrified.

"Wonder whar dey 's gone?" she muttered; then sprang aside with a sharp cry as a horse's nose almost touched her shoulder.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"BUT HE WOR ALL I HAD!"

SHE turned to meet the large, deep-set eyes of Cracker Joe.

"Hello, old lady!" he exclaimed, his horse restive and champing; "whar'd you come from?"

"'For de Lawd, I did n't s'pect to see you!" she said, with due humility. "Yo' 's come to 'rest me, I reckons; well, I 's ready."

"Whar 's the gang, old lady?" he asked.

"Lawd knows — I don't. Dey lef' 'arly dis yer mornin', 'n' I hain't set eyes on 'em sense."

"No, nor you won't, very soon," he made answer. "They 're all taken to jail, every mother's son of 'em, before the clock struck four this morning."

"How d' ye know?" she asked, clasping her strong hands together and looking at him with a terror-struck face.

"Oh, I h'ard this mornin' at sunrise. I 've been in the saddle ever since five o'clock. I struck on a trail through this hummock, and thought I 'd keep it up, though it has a hard

name. I've some bad news for ye, old lady," he added; "ye must brace up 'n' b'ar it."

"De Lawd be mussifle!" was all she could say.

"Your Dick is in the woods here, not a hundred yards away. I stumbled on him, and come mighty near goin' right over him."

"Killed?" she articulated, with a scared face.

"Dead as a door-nail."

"'N' I 's ben gone all day fer my own selfish self!" she said, the tears streaming down her face. "Take me thar; I d'serves it, but it's de las' straw dat breaks de camble's back."

He led her to the place. She knelt down beside the body.

"I h'ard him call me out'n dem woods," she sobbed. "I's hed trubble after trubble, but dis yer's mo' dan I kin b'ar."

"Well, old lady, you 'd better come away; I 'll see to him," said Cracker Joe.

"De Lawd be mussifle!" she murmured again in a heart-broken voice.

"Well, you can't hardly expect it of Him, can ye', now? The gang was a precious hard one, 'n' he was the leader. It's lucky the officers didn't see you, or they 'd hev taken you as an accomplice."

"I was n't, de Lawd knows; I wor on'y a cook," was her response.

"They would n't trouble about the difference," he said, with a dry smile.

"But he wor all I hed;" she said. "I wisht *He'd* take me too;" and she followed Cracker Joe back to the vicinity of the cave, her figure pathetic in its utter abandonment to sorrow. "I 's good for nothin' now."

"Oh, come, cheer up, old lady," said Cracker Joe, holding in his restive mare.

"Dar 's Miss Luce — I dars n't ask after her. I done gone kill dat ar chile, I bleeve," she said with a trembling voice.

"Well, she 's a good way from dead, Aunt Pruny, 'n' you did n't hurt her much. I told her the hull story. When she learned that I *married* your pretty daughter, I — Hello! take care! you came near unseating me," he exclaimed, his dark eyes flashing.

"Tell me dat agin!" cried Aunt Pruny, as soon as he had coaxed his mare into good humor.

"Well, I 'll tell ye twice if ye wish," said Joe, quietly. "Your daughter was my wife; the little gal you nursed was my legitimate daughter. Lucy forgave everything when I told her I was married; some women would n't."

Down fell Aunt Pruny, her bowed head almost touching the ground.

"Come, come, old lady! no need of any heroics, you know. It 's all right. The gal is at home,

'n' she 's pretty, 'n' proud as the devil, too, — but she 's my daughter; 'n' Lucy won't be quite as happy as she orter till you come back."

"*Me* come back!" muttered Pruny, and she looked like one in a dream. "Yo' don' mean it! 'N' that chile — my gal's chile — oh, Lawd God! my heart feels like bustin wid de joy. De Lawd takes away, 'n' de Lawd gibs! Blessed be his name!"

"But see here, Aunt Pruny." His voice changed, growing low and stern. "For the gal's own sake, remember, there must be nothin' even hinted to her of this matter. If I forgive you freely, — and you attempted my life, — and we take you back, you must never, on your solemn promise, tell Marie the secret of her birth. All who knew the truth of the matter are dead. The moment you do so you break her heart, ruin me, and hurt Lucy. I 'll attend to that business if it ever becomes necessary."

"Oh, dat 's mighty easy," said Aunt Pruny; "I 's gib up all worl'ly things, 'n' it 'll be my joy 'n' delight to work fer her, bless her sweet face! 'N' I 'll never tell — no, not ef she looks down on me. I 's hed a hard lot sense I lef' yo', 'n' I sees I wor a proud, spiteful nigger, big wid my own impo'tence. I wor jes de self-righteousest critter 'n all de country, sendin' folks jist whar I please, not whar de Lord please; 'n' I 's been punished — da 's

so. An' now, Lawd, letteth dou dy sarvent depart 'n peace, fo' mine eyes hab seen dy salivation."

Then she shook her head. "I forgits da' pore boy layin' over dar," she moaned.

"I 'll see to him," said Cracker Joe. "What traps hev ye got?"

"On'y an ole gown or two," she made reply.

"I 'll come over after you, then, with the farm wagon. I don't s'pose ye 've harn any news?"

Aunt Pruny shook her head.

"Jim Dunn's little gal Derry is dead 'n' buried."

"My hebbenly Marster!" exclaimed Aunt Pruny, grieved and shocked; "dat ar pore chile as rocked her own cradle o' sorrer! But it 's all right; she was n't their sort, 'n' her fader 's in jail; reckon she 's safe, pore lamb!"

"Hermit George is going to git married to Miss Stella Ainsley."

"Um, um!" muttered Aunt Pruny; "dat ar *is* news. Pore little Derry! But yo' don' car' nothin' 'bout him," she added.

"Oh, yes; we 're — reconciled."

"You 's what?" she cried sharply.

"Good friends now!"

"Well, clar ef dar ain't too much good news fo' one day. Ef 't wan't fo' my pore boy — But I 'm goin' to moan fer him while yo' 's gone."

Very quiet, humble, and unassuming was the Aunt Pruny who was set down at the door of Lucy Cottage that night.

"Miss Luce" came out and caught her in her arms. "Oh, Aunt Pruny! what shall I say to you? If you only knew how more than glad I am to see you! You dear old soul! it was all right, after all." Then turning with a new light in her eyes, "Come here, Marie; here is an old friend of yours."

Marie came, beautiful, proud, and self-contained. "Oh, yes, I remember your face. I am very glad to see you," said the girl, with a cold little smile; "you were my nurse."

"I were, Missy," — and none knew the restraint she put upon herself as she answered, her great eyes brilliant with tears, — "I were, 'n' it does me good to see yo', chile. De Lawd bless yo', chile; de Lawd bless yo', Missy."

"Curious how she looked at me," said Marie; "and rather unpleasant, though she is better looking than the average negro. I thought she would never let go of me, with her big eyes." And she took up her fancy-work again, and Aunt Pruny entered her domain, the kitchen, where she sat, quite heedless of the presence of the two other girls, talking to herself and crying like a child.

Mrs. Joe had found a companion in Marie, but not a helper in the true sense of the word, as

she had in Jim Dunn's daughter. She missed Derry's active fingers and helpful ways, and sometimes went down to the Dunns' cabin, where poor, limp Mrs. Dunn drank whiskey when she could get it, smoked her pipe, and mourned her two girls perpetually.

"Seems 's if some folks ain't fer no good," she moaned, on the occasion of one of these visits. "Thar's Dunn in prison, — 'n' he 'll die thar, likely, he 's so powerful weak, — 'n' my boys as good fer nothin' as ever. Derry 'n' Mandy they 's gone, two o' the best children ever lived. I jes wish I was gone too;" and so she maundered on to any one who would listen.

Mrs. Joe was the only friend who sympathized with her, who gave the boys work and shamed them into working, who gave the girls sewing and such advice as they needed. But the crowning glory of her kindness, in Mrs. Dunn's eyes, was when she caused to be erected a neat white headstone over poor little Derry's grave, on which were recorded the names of both sisters, who in their deaths were not divided.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"IF IT HAD ONLY BEEN MY LOT!"

IN the unpretending little church with the pretentious name, where Stella had lifted her glorious voice from week to week, there was a double wedding one sunny May morning, — Stella and George Barron, Kate and Will Chestnut.

Kate's father had yielded to the inevitable. It was his wish that his daughter should be married in New York, in old Trinity, with a degree of splendor which as a wealthy man it would have been in his power to compass; but as there was no mother to go to, — Kate having been motherless for years, — and but few relations, she carried the day, and the ceremony came off with much éclat.

Canty sat near the door, his head down and his heels up. Despite the sacred character of the place, he was humming his favorite tune and keeping lively time all by himself with his agile feet.

He was to be retained in Barron's service, and accompany the bride and groom abroad.

Russel and Tom vetoed the whole arrangement. They agreed that as they were to go home with-

out the factors that made home such a paradise, the service was more like a funeral, and sat it through with gloomy faces. All the neighbors were there.

A few well-dressed negroes occupied the seats near the door. Among them was Aunt Pruny, in a smart turban and a new silk dress, the first she had ever possessed, — a gift from Cracker Joe.

Even Mrs. Dunn was there with her shiftless family; but the sun-bonnet was a thing of the past. Mrs. Carew had attended to that.

I have to add, that not a great while afterward Cracker Joe, during a sharp political contest, was nominated member of Congress from his district, and finally elected. Great were the rejoicings thereat; for it was more through personal regard than political availability, faith in the soundness of his convictions, his sagacity, above all in his thorough honesty of purpose and straightforwardness of action, that he was finally elected.

A lawn party was in order now. Lucy and Marie were anxious to give the brides a welcome on a scale commensurate with their merits and standing, and a large force was put to work to make the grounds of Lucy Cottage beautiful with light and decoration.

Scores of fat-pine fires built upon pedestals illuminated the garden and the grounds. Tables were set on the spacious veranda for special guests, and also along the avenues under the oaks for all who wished to participate. Arches blazed above the gates and over the entrances; the people came from far and near, and a band discoursed delightful strains.

Marie and her mother, richly dressed, did the honors of the home feast. The Ainsleys, the two brides, and all the best people of Wild Rose gathered on the porches and in the house.

George Barron and his wife were to start on the morrow for an extended tour abroad, and Stella could think and talk of little else.

Marie listened with wide-open eyes. To capture a man like that! to visit Europe! — what more could a woman ask?

"If it had only been my lot!" she sighed.

"I've been wondering if poor little Derry can see us," said Mrs. Carew to Marie, in one of the pauses of feasting and merriment.

"If she could, what good would it do her?" asked Marie, who seldom imagined things.

"I don't know; but I really think the child would be happier, seeing us so happy."

Marie shook her head.

"If I had loved him," she said, with an almost imperceptible nod toward George Barron, "as

she did, I could n't bear to see him happy with any one else, — I could n't. I should want to fly to the farthest corner of Paradise and hide myself."

"You selfish child!" said Mrs. Carew, laughing. "Derry grew very sweet and resigned toward the last," she added thoughtfully. "I don't think going there would change her."

There was a ball which Cracker Joe opened with Mrs. Barron, Mrs. Carew dancing with George Barron. There was also a dance on the lawn. Canty, stimulated by an unusual allowance of hot coffee, gesticulating with the nervous rapidity usual to him, used his feet with marvellous celerity, swinging round like a tectotum, and finally ended with a nimble leap and a somersault which took away the breath of the crowd, though they applauded him to his heart's content.

Aunt Pruny was here, there, and everywhere, mistress of the ceremonies outside the house, and bore her honors meekly.

Canty paused and addressed the crowd.

"Yes, I 's gwine to Faro- lan'; dat means Egypt lan' too, —

"Let my people go."

And he began to sing the old negro refrain of "Moses in Egypt," taking fantastic steps with his limber feet.

"I is one o' dem peoples, 'n' I 'm gwine to see

de Bible lan' o' Cana," he added, as his admiring auditors gathered round.

"Sugar cana, I reckons," said a negro punster; and the laugh went up.

Aunt Pruny looked loftily down on his bent figure and grotesque motions.

"Yo' 's one ob yo' mudder's chillen, 'n' de wuthlessest ob dem all. She wor the dancinest creeter; could n't stan' still — dance at one end, laugh at de oder; light 'n' triflin', — 'n' yo' 's har livin' image."

"She never got caught long o' de moonshiners, dough," said Canty, continuing to dance. Then, as he saw Aunt Pruny's crestfallen countenance, he added, "I' s subsidin', I is, 'n' I begs yo' pardin, if I *is* wuthless;" which elicited another burst of applause.

And at the last, when Cracker Joe was called upon for a speech, and proud little Marie ran upstairs with her fingers in her ears, he astonished them all with the simplicity of his language and the delicacy and beauty of his imagination; and they felt that their interests and those of Florida were safe in his hands.

At the close went up one wild cheer, and from the house to the road the welkin rang with good wishes.

And Lucy, as she turned to him when they were once more alone, and felt herself pressed to

his true heart, experienced a pride that was beyond expression for this man who had not only overcome circumstances, but conquered himself; and to her no higher appellation than that the people had bestowed on him, and that, no matter to what heights his ambition might attain, would still cling to him, could sound sweeter in her ears than the simple cognomen of

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